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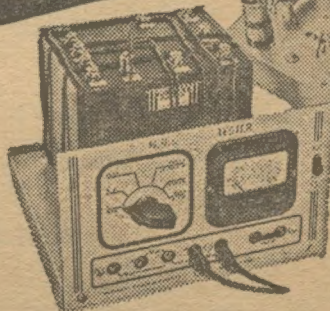
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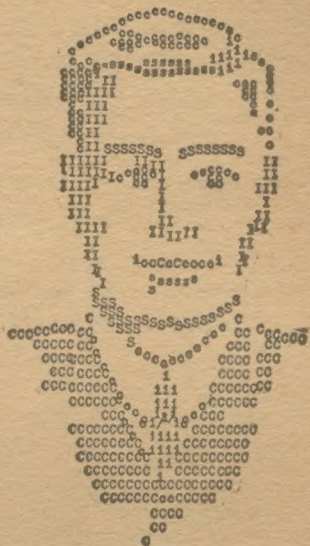
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● ON THE TRAIL ●



THAT midnight of 1895 was darker than the inside of a coal mine, and the cautious engineer of the Texas-bound Rock Island train slowed to a crawl for the Cimarón River bridge crossing.

He and his fireman were intently watching the crossing when they felt the sudden, deadly pressure of gun muzzles against their spines and a harsh voice commanded:

"Stick 'em up!"

At the same time, a volley of shots rang out from the baggage car, where the express messenger was defending fifty thousand dollars in gold coin going to pay soldiers in Texas.

Cagy Bill Doolin, at that time one of the West's most wanted desperadoes, had planned the hold-up carefully. Three of his outlaw gang cleaned the passengers of all the money and valuables they had.

But they didn't get the fifty thousand dollars. Despite two bad bullet wounds, the express messenger fought off the owlhooters.

Finally, Doolin called off the attempt and led his men—Rattlesnake Jim, Dan Clifton, Charlie Pierce, Buck Wateman, Bill Radler, Dick West, Arkansas Tom, Ike Black and Dick Yeager—on the run for their hideout in the Gloss Mountains, also called the Gyp Hills.

Before dawn, Deputy United States Marshal Chris Madsen was leading a posse on the outlaws' trail, and Oklahoma's greatest manhunt was on. It was a hunt that lasted one hundred and twenty-five days, involved one thousand possemen, and gave the then almost unknown Dick Yeager the right to brag that he was "the biggest outlaw Oklahoma ever had!"

A genial, husky six-footer with amazing strength, Dick Yeager was twenty-six years

old at the time of the Rock Island train robbery. Born in Indiana, his right name was Nelson Ellsworth Wyatt.

His family emigrated to Kansas and there Dick was accused of stealing a horse when he was eighteen. He made a getaway to Indian Territory, where he was considered just another small-time rustler and gun-slinger until he got in with Bill Doolin.

Before Doolin's hard-riding wild bunch reached the Gyp Hills after the robbery, Clifton and Pierce were killed and Radler was shot and captured. But once in the wild, rough hills, the outlaws split up and for two months the lawmen vainly tried to cut their sign.

FEELING secure at last, Doolin, Wateman, Dick Yeager and Ike Black collected two honkytonk girls and started celebrating in a camp at Steer Canyon. There they were found by a Woods County posse led by Sheriff McGrath and Deputy Gus Hadwiger.

The posse surrounded the camp and started throwing lead from Winchesters. Returning the fire, the outlaws held them off until almost evening when the officers charged. Cut off from their horses, the outlaws made a desperate run and got away in the darkness, although the two women were captured.

Again the owlhoot bunch divided. Dick Yeager and Ike Black stuck together and hid out in Guthrie. Doolin was cornered before he left the hills and was killed by Deputy Marshal Heck Thomas.

Discovered at Guthrie, Yeager and Black started another hard run for the mountains, with Deputy Marshal Bill Banks and a posse

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

right at their horses' heels and the entire countryside taking arms against them.

Without a chance to rest or eat and suffering from wounds they'd received in the Steer Canyon fight, Dick and Ike Black finally succumbed to fatigue. They staked out their horses in a field near Sheridan Post Office and went to sleep.

A bullet that kicked dust into Dick's face awoke them. Two hundred men had surrounded the field and were shooting as they closed in.

"They've got us, Dick!" Ike Black exclaimed.

"Like hell they have," Dick gritted. "Follow me, Ike."

Grabbing his boots in one hand and his six-gun in the other, Dick Yeager charged straight at the possemen. Ike Black was hit by a .45 slug, but he followed Dick and they shot their way through the posse.

Every road to the mountains was closed and the outlaws were afoot. But Yeager stole a horse and wagon. While Ike hid under the seat, Dick calmly drove through the cordon of lawmen, who grinned when he played "The Cowboy's Lament" on his harmonica.

They still had to reach the mountains where they hoped to elude their followers for good. Abandoning the horse and wagon, Yeager and Ike Black stole saddle horses and started off again.

The foothills were in sight when they ran into Deputy Marshall Jack Ward and ten men who started firing at first sight. Yeager's plunging mustang was spoiling his aim. He sprang from the saddle and beat off the posse with a flaming Colt in each hand.

At last the way was clear to the mountains, and Dick Yeager and Ike Black reached their sanctuary. But the hunt was on in earnest now and Marshal Bill Banks took Lew Fossett and his father, William D. Fossett, and never left the trail for a minute.

After three days, the outlaws' horses were so tired that Yeager had to ride behind Black, quiring the overloaded animal at every step to keep it going. Worse yet, they were forced down out of the mountains.

Trying to get fresh mounts, Yeager and Black approached a homesteader's sod hut. There were no horses, but they were given some grub, which they ate in the yard.

But they had been spotted when they left the shelter of the mountains. As the outlaws ate, fifteen heavily-armed men crawled through the homesteader's corn patch and started shooting.

The first volley killed Black and one slug caught Dick in the stomach. It was a wound that would have killed most men, but Yeager again shot his way out.

SHERIFF THRALLS was riding at the head of a large posse from Enid, when he sighted the quarry.

It was a bright moonlit night and the posse tracked Yeager until two in the morning. Yeager was in such pain from his wounds that he couldn't keep the horse on a straight path and his trail twisted over the countryside for eighteen miles.

At last the posse found the horse, but the outlaw was gone again. They figured his wounds were so bad that he could no longer ride.

Sheriff Thrall's posse picked up Yeager's footprints the next day. Three men from Enid—Jailer Woods, Deputy Tom Smith and Special Deputy Ad Polk—followed the tracks along a creek while the rest guarded the only road in the vicinity.

The sun was high and hot overhead and the three trailers were panting and dripping with sweat when they reached a corn patch. While Woods held their horses, Smith and Polk stalked their quarry through the corn.

In a clear patch in the center of the field, they found Yeager collapsed on the ground. Yeager's head jerked up. His once keen blue eyes were red-rimmed and wild as he looked at the deputies.

"Put 'em up!" Polk repeated.

Yeager blinked, then his right hand dove for the six-gun at his side. Polk and Smith shot him before he could raise it. Bullets from both rifles slammed into Yeager's stomach, knocking him back to the ground, still gripping his revolver.

With great effort, Yeager raised his right hand.

"Both hands," said Polk.

Yeager spoke for the first time since they'd caught him. "I can't," he said wearily. "My left arm's broken."

Dick Yeager never stood trial for the Rock Island train robbery. That he lived at all after his capture was a minor miracle to make Oklahoma doctors shake their heads in wonder.

But after he was locked in a cell in the county jail in Enid, Dick Yeager held court for thirty-five days. Like some mythical outlaw king, he chatted with the people who came from miles around to see him, bringing food and beer.

He joked with his jailers, let awe-struck youngsters shake his hand and presented his worn single-action Colt to his lawyer, Houstin James.

Dick Yeager died in jail on a Saturday night when Enid's cowpunchers were having their usual rip-roaring celebration. He was buried the next day, but of the hundreds of curious people who had come to gaze at him behind the bars, only half a dozen followed his body to its boothill grave.



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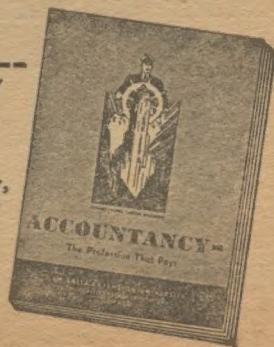
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*They played a strange brand of
poker in Long Bow—a no-money
game for men's lives!*



The Galloways were swerving
wildly from the flames. . . .

SIX-GUNS IN SALVATION

CHAPTER ONE

Boothill Poker

KERN RANDALL came out of the cook's kitchen at a little past seven o'clock in the evening, that warm, contented feeling in the pit of his stomach. He'd been in the saddle since eleven in the morning, working over the north rim of the Cross T range, and the cook's chow was the first bit of food which had passed his lips.

Stiff-legged, the crick still in the small of his back, he bent



By
**LANCE
KERMIT**

over the water pail on the bench outside the door, and sloshed a few dippers over his hands. On the porch of the main house he could see a cigar glowing, and he knew that Ben Tragan, Cross T owner, had seen him come in. There were lights in the bunkhouse, indicating that the riders had not left for the dance over at Whalen's place.

I should go, Kern thought. He might be there. You never could tell where he would turn up. He had a fleeting image of a weazened, money-faced man with smoky, cat's green eyes, a surprising amount of strength in his small body, strength to swing a heavy pickaxe and drive the point into the small of a man's back, so swiftly that the man was dead before he was the wiser.

Ostensibly watching the bunkhouse lights, he saw Ben Tragan's cigar move as the big ranch owner shook off ash. His glance caught on Tragan's heavy fingers; he hadn't liked the looks of Tragan's hands when he first signed up with the Cross T.

He moved off the porch and, almost without thinking, paused in the yellow glow from one of the windows—and froze.

The Cross T bunkhouse was no different from dozens of others where Kern had stayed while on the trail. The floor was of rammed earth. There were nine bunks tacked up against the walls, with a card table in the center of the floor, set near the potbelly stove. The stove was out now in mid-summer.

Six men stood around the card table, their

bodies tense, faces cold and expressionless. In his two days with the Cross T, Kern had met all of them, but many of the names were still vague. He saw the foreman, Ace Bentley facing him, small beads of sweat standing out on his forehead, his mouth tight.

The pack lay on the table. A thin, blond-haired man by the name of Boardman, was looking down at the card in his hand and moistening thin lips. The others turned to look at him and Kern got the implication. The six Cross T riders were drawing cards, and Boardman seemed to have drawn high.

A chair creaked on the porch behind Kern, and he knew that Ben Tragan had seen him at the window. He continued to walk toward the door then, regretting that Tragan had seen that. Surveying the bunkhouse before entering had been almost instinctive with him, but he didn't want to put suspicion in the Cross T man's mind and maybe lose his job before he'd had time to make a search of the country. He had to work somewhere while he was looking, and Cross T was as good as any other outfit.

AS HE went through the bunkhouse door, the six men at the table turned suddenly. The card slipped from Boardman's thin hands and drifted to the floor a yard away from Kern. He picked it up and handed it over. It was the ace of spades.

"Good card," Kern said. He dropped it on the table.

He noticed as he walked past that no money was in sight, and all of these men had been standing up as they drew cards. He was curious, but his long, brown face indicated nothing.

Bentley, the foreman, cleared his throat huskily, and said, "Just get in, friend?"

Kern nodded. "Picked up eight beeves in that little draw a mile north of the creek. I run 'em back across the water."

They were watching him closely as he sat down on his bunk and fumbled with his warbag. He could see that Boardman's face had lost some of its color, and that the blond man's mind was far away.

Kern came up with a clay pipe and a small leather sack of tobacco. He stuffed tobacco into the pipe, looking at it casually. He heard boots moving across the floor as the Cross T riders went away from the table. Kern stretched his long legs. He looked up as Ace Bentley paused in front of him. The Cross T foreman was a chunky man with red hair and a flattened nose. He had a solid bulldog jaw and thick lips.

"We're ridin' in ten minutes. Better saddle up."

Kern watched the smoke curling up from the bowl of the pipe. "Where?" he asked.

Bentley's thick fingers were hooking in and out of his gunbelt. Kern watched the fingers, and listened to boots stop shuffling on the floor. The other Cross T men were waiting for Bentley's answer, seemingly concerned about this trifling matter, and that was a peculiar thing.

"Jack Whalen invited us over for the dance," Bentley was saying slowly. "The boss thinks all of us ought to go."

Kern nodded, looking up suddenly. He saw Boardman watching him, his mouth slightly open. Boardman was still standing by the table, gripping the top rung of the chair with his right hand. Kern saw that the knuckles of that hand were white.

Riding across the north range Kern had thought about tonight's shindig. A range dance was not usually a last-minute affair. This dance at Whalen's would have been arranged weeks ago, and the riders would have been talking about it all that time. Tragan, this morning, had acted as if he'd just received the announcement and were passing it on to the men.

"You goin'?" Bentley asked Kern, the question sounding almost as if it were an order.

Kern took the pipe from his lips again. He'd thought in the beginning that the Cross T riders would already be gone when he returned to the bunkhouse, and he'd been surprised that they were still there. He'd learned that it was thirty miles to Whalen's Flying W spread, and they would have left early for the festivity. He had the feeling now that they'd been waiting for him to get back.

"Reckon," Kern said. He thought he saw relief come into the foreman's eyes.

"Sure," Bentley grunted. "Glad to have you." He walked away then, and Kern saw the blond Boardman relax over at the table. Boardman was on the tall side, thin in the shoulders, hatchet-faced. He had a wisp of blond mustache, and in dress affected the dandy.

The door opened then, and Ben Tragan stepped in, the cigar still in his mouth, an inch of it protruding from his thin lips. Tragan looked at Bentley across the room, and Kern saw something pass between them. Tragan was a short man, with excessively wide shoulders, bullet-head and a high, hooked nose. His small, beady-black eyes moved back and forth across the room, to Kern, to Bentley, and then over to Boardman.

"Ready?" Tragan asked.

"Yeah, boss."

The Cross T boss took the cigar from his mouth and looked at it, and then threw it into a spittoon near the cold stove. One of the Cross T riders, buckling on his gunbelt, dropped it and swore under his breath.

Kern leaned back in his bunk, eyes blank,

listening to the sounds, knowing that these men were jittery tonight, and that they shouldn't have been, going to a dance. There was no horseplay here, no joking.

"Well, let's go." Ben Tragan went out.

Ace Bentley walked after him, and then Kern knocked the ashes from his pipe and stood up. The others were filing out of the room, some of them walking down toward the corral, others in the direction of the barn. It was dark now, with stars giving the only light.

Kern paused in the doorway and then, instead of walking to the barn for his horse, he headed for a smaller corral in the opposite direction. He'd hung his blankets over this corral after rubbing down his horse in the barn. There had been a breeze blowing on that side of the house, and the blanket had been damp with perspiration.

He could hear the talk from the barn, and then a man said, "Where's Kern?"

Kern pulled up abruptly within ten feet of the corral. Two men were standing down there, and he caught a few of the words. Ben Tragan's growl came to him.

"I saw him looking through the window. He's kind of curious about that draw."

"He's a drifter," Ace Bentley said. "You were lookin' for one, Ben, an' now you got him, an' in time."

"Maybe," Tragan observed feelingly, "he's not a drifter. How in hell do we know?"

Bentley laughed then, a mirthless sound.

"Won't make a damn bit o' difference after tonight, Ben," he said. "Nobody's askin' who's layin' in a hole six foot by four."

Kern backed up slowly and then, turning, walked swiftly toward the barn. They had two lanterns swinging from the rafters, and he saddled a buckskin horse which he'd ridden the previous day. He had another blanket in the barn which he used instead of the one on the corral fence.

He took a long time saddling the animal, waiting until two of the other Cross T men had gone out with their mounts. He slid his Colt .45 from the holster, examined the charges, and then let it slide back. He was beginning to realize that he'd walked into something quite serious. He knew nothing of the politics of the Long Bow country, but every range had its problems. It was evident that Tragan was playing some kind of game, and that he, Kern Randall, was to have a part, a rather gruesome one.

Ty Boardman was standing outside the barn door, leaning over the saddle, a cigarette in his mouth. Kern could not see his face clearly.

Boardman said casually, "Nice night for a fiasco," and Kern made a note of the man's carefully controlled accents.

"We'll see," Kern told him. He watched

Tragan and Bentley come up. Tragan rode a big black horse, and he said grimly, "There'll be Anchor boys over at Whalen's tonight. We don't want too much drinking, and we don't want trouble."

Kern Randall, hunched in the saddle, knew this also was for him, but he wasn't sure why. He had one fact which could mean something. Anchor was the outfit Tragan was bucking.

WITH BENTLEY and Tragan in the lead, they moved down past the corral and headed to the road which led to Salvation. There was little talk as they rode through the night. Deliberately, Kern let the buckskin lag so that he was riding in the rear. No one seemed to take any notice of this, which confirmed his own opinion that the fireworks wouldn't begin till later in the evening—at the dance.

Hell of a place for a killing, Kern thought ruefully, if that was what it was going to be, outright. He tried to put some of the ends together, but nothing fitted—beyond that if there was hell afoot, then he might very easily find the man he sought.

Halfway to Salvation, they cut west, moving across open rangeland. Kern saw lights of a ranch house, and several dogs began to howl. Kern pulled up beside the man nearest to him. This man went by the name of Davis. He was small, hard-faced and a drinker.

"Anchor?" Kern asked, nodding toward the lights. He could hear a woman's voice calling the dogs. The voice was low-pitched, musical, and he was surprised.

"That's Anchor," Davis told him morosely. "Reckon she'll be at the dance tonight."

Kern didn't ask any more questions. He had one point in mind. Anchor range touched on Cross T, and that could mean a dispute over range boundaries, trouble over strays—a lot of things. He tried to tell himself this didn't concern him because he was trailing the man who had murdered his brother. He remembered Ace Bentley's words, then, and queerly, for the first time, felt anger burning inside him. He would have to be more careful—a man obsessed by his mission might easily end in boothill.

Davis, a little in his cups, growled on. "Dancin' with everybody but Cross T. There's a hell of a thing!"

"Who?" Kern asked.

"Katie Lawrence," Davis said after a pause. "She's Big Jim's kid."

"Jim Lawrence run Anchor?"

"Jim cashed in six months ago," Davis explained. "Katie's runnin' Anchor now. She an' her mother."

Kern saw a rider up ahead look back at them. This man called softly to Bentley, and then the foreman turned his head.

"Bat."

Davis pushed his horse up to the head of the column, and Kern heard Bentley giving him a tongue lashing. He couldn't hear the words.

He did hear the tough Davis say, "The hell with you, Ace."

Kern Randall's face cracked into a grim smile. They passed two more ranch houses, and they were beginning to move into higher country when a man called out softly, "There she is!"

Kern saw the colored lanterns strung across the porch and in front of the barn. He could hear a guitar plunking, and then an accordion picked up a melody. Somebody was laughing as the Cross T riders headed down a slope, rode past a big corral, and pulled up at a hitching rack near the barn.

There were at least seventy-five men and women at the dance. The barn floor had been cleared, and at the north end of it was a small platform on which the musicians sat, guitar, accordion and banjo. A fiddler joined this trio a few minutes after the Cross T men came in.

Kern stood near the doorway watching the dancers.

"Get a partner," Ace Bentley said to him. "Go on out there, kid."

"I'll watch," Kern told him. It was hot inside the building, and he stepped out a few minutes later. Some of the Cross T men were dancing. The others had disappeared.

Kern heard another party coming in, horses' hoofs thumping as they clattered past the corral.

"Anchor," a man called. "Kate an' George are comin' in."

Kern made a cigarette and lighted it as he leaned against the wall of the barn. He watched the gigantic Jack Whalen, owner of Flying W, greet this new party. He caught a glimpse of a girl's face, flushed from the ride, eyes sparkling.

She walked past him, giving a quick glance, recognizing him as a stranger in this crowd. Three men went with her into the barn, and Kern studied the tallest of them reflectively. This man had sand-colored hair, and a long jaw. He had a habit of looking around quickly, taking in everything in one glance. He reminded Kern of an animal being hunted, aware of it, yet unafraid.

That'll be George, Kern thought, *Anchor foreman.*

The tall man's gray eyes met Kern's for a brief instance, measured him, took in the Colt six-gun on his right hip, and then moved away. Kern saw him dancing with Kate Lawrence ten minutes later. The girl was in her early twenties, with copper-colored hair. She danced gracefully, and they made by far the most handsome couple on the floor.

Kern got a better look at her when she came out into the open air again for refreshments. A puncher, already a trifle under the weather, staggered towards her, and the sandy-haired man pushed him away with a big hand.

Kern watched Bat Davis come out from the other end of the barn, wiping his lips. Then Ben Tragan crossed over toward Kate Lawrence and the foreman, and Kern saw the tightness come into George's gray eyes.

Tragan smiled as he spoke, and he looked straight at Kate, ignoring the foreman. Kern couldn't hear any of the words, but the talk didn't last long. Tragan bowed and walked away, still smiling, his face flushed with the heat of the night.

CHAPTER TWO

"You'll Never Ride Out . . ."

KERN moved around in the barn, watching for a weazened face and cat's green eyes. He didn't see his man. He had guessed he wouldn't. This was too public a gathering—his quarry, if he had any sense, would be riding line for one of the outfits, staying out on the range.

Going out the rear door of the barn, a man fell in step with Kern, and he recognized George, Anchor foreman. The tall man had a cigar in his mouth.

He said softly, "Cross T?"

"That's right," Kern told him.

"You're a stranger, so I'm telling you this—don't start anything that you can't finish."

Kern nodded, smiling a little. He knew now what the Cross T was after, and he didn't blame Ty Boardman for worrying. This tall foreman of Anchor was very cool, and very dangerous.

"You don't know me, George," Kern said.

"I know your outfit," George returned. "I know your boss."

Kern spat in the dirt. "If you were smart, my friend," he observed, "you wouldn't walk in the light."

The Anchor foreman started, realizing for the first time that he'd been framed in the light from the rear barn door. He stepped into the shadows, giving Kern a quick, curious glance.

"Thought I'd tell you, friend," George muttered, evidently perplexed. He added as an afterthought. "Don't figure Tragan will make it so crude."

Bat Davis stumbled out of the darkness then, and George stepped away, moving around the corner of the barn. Kern saw him dancing with Kate Lawrence again, smiling, his eyes still moving with that animal alertness around the big dance floor.

Bat Davis came to stand with Kern, looking through the open door. Davis cursed as he tried in vain to strike a match on the seat of his levis.

"That George," Kern observed, "is pretty tough."

"He won't be after tonight," Davis growled. Then he shut up very suddenly, knowing that he'd said too much.

Kern had one dance during the evening, and no drinks. Twice he ran across Ty Boardman, and he saw the strain in the blond man's face. Boardman had taken a few drinks to brace himself.

Playing a hunch, Kern moved up beside the fiddle player during an intermission. He'd spotted this man earlier in the evening as a man who knew everybody. A lank, raw-boned chap with a wide mouth, he'd been drinking freely during the evening and his tongue was loose. Kern waited till he was alone, a beer glass in his hand.

He nodded to the man and said casually, "These things go on all night?"

"Hell," the fiddler chuckled. "Might be goin' half o' tomorrer also, mister."

"If it's not broken-up," Kern smiled. "I hear there's bad blood between Anchor and Cross T."

"Always was," the fiddler said.

Kern nodded thoughtfully. "This country's new to me," he said, and watched the fiddler hastily empty his glass. In five minutes he had the complete story.

Jim Lawrence had been running cattle in Greene Canyon for a good many years before Ben Tragan came to the Long Bow range. The canyon was the best rangeland in the state, and it was situated at the south end of Anchor range.

After Big Jim's death, Tragan had moved cattle into the canyon, claiming it was free grass, and that Anchor never had had any real claim to it. George Brian, Anchor foreman, had chased Tragan's herd out, swearing that he would shoot on sight the first Cross T man coming into the canyon.

"Enough room there to graze ten thousand head o' cattle," the fiddler told him. "The man holds the canyon kin set himself up as the biggest rancher in the Long Bow country. His word becomes the law."

"George Brian's stopping that," Kern suggested.

"George is a good man," the fiddler told him.

If he lives, Kern thought. The picture was quite plain now. Tragan had attempted to take advantage of the defenseless woman at the Anchor, but Brian had put him in his place.

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Tragan had to get Brian out of the way and the next move, Kern knew, was being made tonight, and he was in some way involved in it.

The dancing began again in another half hour, and Kern missed George Brian this time. He'd been watching the Cross T men. Ty Boardman seemed to have disappeared a while back, but Bat Davis was still around, and also Ben Tragan. Bentley and the remaining crew were gone.

Kern walked over to one of the tables and started to help himself to a big steak piled on the platter. He felt a hand on his arm, and then a man by the name of O'Day was talking to him. O'Day was a Cross T hand, an older man than the others, with a face like mahogany and broken teeth.

"Ace wants to see you down at the corral," O'Day said.

Kern nodded. "Trouble?"

"You go find out," O'Day grinned. "Ace said he wants to see you."

Kern hitched at his gunbelt and walked away. He heard O'Day coming behind him, his boots crunching the dust.

"Where?" Kern asked. He didn't see anyone near the corral. It was quite dark down here and he kept his hand on his gun.

"The other side."

Kern waited this time till O'Day walked at his side. He could see a lantern shining through the bars of the corral. The lantern seemed to be standing on the ground. A man passed in front of it.

Coming around the bend of the corral, Kern saw others—Cross T men. Ty Boardman was facing him, a six-gun in his hand, his face tense and drawn. He had the gun leveled on a tall man who stood with his back toward Kern, on the other side of the lantern. This man's hands hung at his sides, fingers taut. The holster at his right hip was empty.

FOREWARNED, Kern stepped to the side to get out of line of Boardman's shot when it came. He saw the tall man turn his head slightly at the sound, and he recognized George Brian, Anchor foreman. The other Cross T men had not drawn guns, but their hands rested on the butts. They were watching Brian and Kern.

Another man stood in the shadows beyond the light of the lantern, and Kern thought it was Ace Bentley, but he was not positive.

"All right!" O'Day yelled suddenly. The Cross T rider had stepped up behind Kern, and Kern heard him pant as he leaped forward. Instinctively, Kern ripped the gun from his holster, tearing it away from O'Day's grasp. He had been watching Boardman's face, and he knew the blond man was going to shoot—at Brian.

Kern got off one fast shot in Boardman's direction, knowing that it would go wild. O'Day jostled his arm even as the gun roared, but the shot was close enough to unnerve Boardman.

George Brian dropped to his knees as Boardman's gun cracked, but Kern knew he had not been hit. Whirling, Kern lashed at O'Day with the barrel of the six-gun, hitting him a glancing blow on the head, knocking him against the bars of the corral.

The group of horses inside the corral plunged wildly with the sound of the two shots, and scurried to the other side. Another gun roared from the shadows, and Kern felt the tug of the bullet as it went through his shirt. He fired at the man he took to be Ace Bentley, but didn't know whether he'd hit anything.

Brian, in one quick movement, kicked over the lantern with his boot, and then leaped toward O'Day to wrest his gun away. Expecting a fusillade of shots, Kern fell flat on his face. Two six-guns winked in the darkness, and he fired at one flash, rolling even as his gun roared. He heard a man scream, a short cry, followed by a low moan.

Somebody was calling sharply, "Get out—get out."

Brian and O'Day were scuffling a few yards away, and then Kern heard the sound of running boots. There were no more shots, and George Brian was cursing softly to himself. The music had stopped very abruptly and there was silence from the direction of the barn. Kern heard several horses pounding away in the night.

He said softly, "You all right, Brian?"

"That damned yellow-belly laid a gun across my head," Brian growled. "I'm bleedin' like a stuck pig."

Kern slid fresh cartridges into the six-gun and then went forward, groping for his man in the darkness. Brian was sitting up.

He said briefly, "They'll bury you for this, friend. You're supposed to be Cross T."

Kern helped the man to his feet. He heard Jack Whalen's booming voice around the corral.

"What in hell's happened there?" Whalen wanted to know.

"Come on up," Kern said. "It's all over."

He was surprised when he heard Ben Tragan say, "Sounds like one of my boys, Jack."

"Damn him," Brian whispered. "Watch him crawl out of this."

Kern helped the injured man around the corral. Lanterns were moving toward them. A man said, "George Brian's been hit."

Then Kate Lawrence was at Brian's side, holding his head up. Kern could see her face in the light of the lanterns. It was very pale. She looked at him, her eyes tight.

"He'll have a headache in the morning, ma'am," Kern told her. "It's not as bad as a bullet."

They came into the light of the colored lanterns overhead and Brian said slowly, "Where in hell is Tragan?"

"You want me, George?" Tragan asked him. "What happened down there?"

A man came up, breathless, and said to Tragan, "One o' your boys got it. Finke is shot through the belly. He just died."

Tragan muttered, "That's too bad." He turned to Brian as Kern held up the injured man. Kate Lawrence was daubing at Brian's head with a handkerchief. Kern saw Ace Bentley coming up behind Tragan. The foreman's jaw was clamped shut and he looked at Kern queerly.

"What in hell happened, George?" Tragan asked.

"Cross T set me up," Brian said tersely. "What about that, Ben?"

"Who?" Tragan asked innocently.

Brian pointed a long finger at Tragan. "You tell Boardman, O'Day, and Red Carmen to get the hell out of this country, Ben right pronto."

Ace Bentley shuffled up. He said to Tragan, "I warned 'em to lay off that damned drinkin'."

Tragan nodded toward Kern. "Here's one of my boys, George. He rides for me."

"No more," Kern said.

Tragan shrugged. "You can't lay it up to me, George, if the boys got a little drunk. They don't have any use for you since that business in the canyon."

"All right," Brian snapped. "You tell them if they ever come near Anchor, or I meet them in town, they'd better be heeled."

Tragan laughed coldly. "You're starting a range war, George," he observed. "You and this drifter."

Kern spoke to Tragan directly. "O'Day and Carmen hadn't had a drink all night. Boardman had enough in him to give him nerve."

"How in hell do you know?" Ace Bentley rasped.

Kern smiled thinly. "I keep my eyes open. Still a man stood in the shadows tonight and took a shot at me. I expect to return the compliment."

Bentley took two steps closer, heavy jaw thrust out. "You wouldn't go to say that was me?"

Jack Whalen stepped in then, shaking his big head. "Boys," he growled, "this started like a nice dance. It ain't that now." He turned to Tragan. "Reckon you better take Finke home, Ben," he said. "The party's over."

Kate Lawrence helped Brian into the barn, and Kern watched them go. There was a

crowd around them as they stood outside the barn.

Tragan passed a hand over his face. "You can't lay it to me, Jack," he said to the Flying W boss, "if some of my boys get liquored up and want to shoot it out with Brian."

"Brian didn't have a gun," Kern said coolly. "It was a hell of a shootout."

Tragan stared at him for a moment in silence.

"You got a big mouth for a new man in this country, my friend. You'll find that out if you stay here."

"Reckon I'll find out more than that if I stay," Kern said dryly, "and I figure on staying." He turned on his heel and walked into the barn.

GEORGE BRIAN was sitting on a box, holding his head to one side, while Kate Lawrence worked on the wound with a wet towel. She'd procured a basin of water and had washed away the blood. She looked at Kern quietly.

"George told me what happened."

Kern leaned against the wall and made a smoke. He looked at Brian quizzically, and Brian returned the stare.

"Need a rider?" Kern asked him at last.

"I need gun hands," Brian told him. "That suit you?"

Kern nodded slowly. He'd figured out Tragan's complex plan in the very brief moments while the shooting was going on. Tragan wanted Brian out of the way, but he didn't want the onus of the killing on his name. They'd planned to shoot Brian, and have a drifter on hand, who could be shot down also, making it appear as if he and Brian had had a shootout, and had been killed. Ty Boardman had been elected to kill Brian after he'd been disarmed. Bentley, himself, standing in the dark, was to shoot down Kern. He was positive now that it had been the Cross T foreman who'd fired the shot which had gone through his shirt.

"I owe Cross T something," Kern said.

"They're stronger than we are," Brian said. "Tragan's been building for this fight."

Kern had another question. "How in hell did they get your gun away?" he asked curiously.

Brian looked sheepish. "That damned Finke," he said, "He's fast with his hands. He came up behind me down at the north end of the barn. O'Day and Boardman covered me when he took away the gun. They herded me down by the corral." The Anchor foreman looked at Kate and grinned.

"Hell of a thing," he chuckled, "nearly bein' killed a month before I'm to be married."

Kern saw the answering smile on Kate Law-

rence's face. He felt the slightest tinge of disappointment, and realized it was foolish. He hardly knew the girl—hadn't even realized that her eyes were violet until this moment—she had simply struck him from the start as the answer to some man's prayers. Some women were like that.

"I ain't figured out your part in this," Brian was saying. "You were a Cross T man, and now you're just as willing to fight Tragan."

"I signed with Tragan two days ago," Kern explained. "Now I know him, I don't like his habits."

"That," Brian growled, "is puttin' it the nice way."

Outside, Kern watched Ace Bentley and Ben Tragan riding away. Other riders were saddling up and pulling out, yelling as they rode. Kern untied his own animal from the hitching rack and rode with Brian and Kate Lawrence. Two other Anchor hands came up behind them.

Kern waited until they were ten minutes from the Flying W before putting his question. He was riding up a little ahead with George Brian.

"Seen a small chap up in this country? Kind of bow-legged, greenish eyes, wrinkled face like a monkey?"

Brian looked straight ahead as if thinking. He said finally, "So that's it." He laughed briefly. "I figured you had a game, friend."

"It'll be no game," Kern observed, "when I meet up with him."

Brian shook his head. "If he's wanted, he'll be out in the hills somewhere. I hear Tragan has a half dozen riders workin' over on the north end o' his range. They kind o' keep out o' sight all the time."

Kern nodded thoughtfully. He hadn't heard about these men in the Cross T bunkhouse, but he'd gotten the impression that Tragan was stronger than the few men he had around his ranch.

"We figure," Brian said, "that Tragan is buildin' up his strength so he kin jump into Green Canyon an' take it away from us."

"How many hands you have?" Kern wanted to know.

Brian scratched his chin. He looked at Kate Lawrence coming up on his right.

"Countin' you—eight."

"Tragan must have at least a dozen," Kern told him. "Maybe more." He paused. "How many men you got in Green Canyon, holdin' it?"

"Four," Brian said.

"Tell him about the Galloways," Kate said softly.

Brian looked at her quickly. He said to Kern. "We got a hundred-fifty head o' imported Galloway stock comin' into Salvation

tomorrow afternoon. The only range they kin live in is Green Canyon."

"Galloway stock?" Kern murmured.

"Best damned beeves in the world," Brian told him. "They're comin' over from Scotland. Big Jim figured on interbreedin' 'em with shorthorns in Green Canyon an' turnin' out the best range cattle in the West. But they wouldn't live on the tough grass outside the canyon."

"Tragan know about these Galloways?"

"Reckon not," Brian said. "We've been keepin' it mighty close."

"There'd be talk on an order like that," Kern observed. "That freighter would be coming through kind of slow and a lot of people would see that strange stock in the cars."

Kate was nodding. "I've been worried about that," she admitted.

Brian growled in his throat, "Be like Tragan to jump the canyon again to keep the Galloways out. They'd be skin an' bones in three months on this damned feed."

"How far is Green Canyon from here?" Kern asked him.

"Hour's ride to the west," Brian said. "You worried?"

"Tragan tried to kill you tonight," Kern told him. "That means he's ready to move, whole hog. Half of his crowd didn't show at the dance."

George Brian pulled up abruptly. He waited for Kate Lawrence. "Reckon you'd better ride on to the ranch, Kate."

"I'll look at the canyon first," the girl told him quietly.

Brian was grinning as they swung away toward the west. He ordered the two Anchor hands to go on.

"Reckon I should o' figured Tragan would be up to somethin' the night before the herd arrived," Brian said ruefully. "Ever think of gettin' a good foreman, Kate?"

"You'll do," Kate Lawrence smiled.

Kern stared straight ahead, listening. There was no further talk until they could see the gap which Brian indicated as the opening to Green Canyon. They were moving up into the highlands now, and they could feel the wind blowing out of the arrayo.

"Our cabin's right inside the pass," Brian said. "We should be seein' a light—"

The Anchor foreman stopped suddenly. Kern Randall saw a rifle wink in the darkness. He could hear the lead whisper over their heads before he heard the flat crack.

"All right, Tip," Brian yelled angrily. "What in hell—"

"Get back, Brian," a man shouted desperately from the gap.

"That's not Tip Bonham," Kate Lawrence said quietly. "Tragan's taken the canyon, George."

"If he's shot up any of those boys—" Brian grated.

Another rifle cracked.

"Time to go," Kern said. "They're still warning us off now, but those slugs might come down."

"We can't do anything tonight," Kate Lawrence called to Brian.

"I'm ridin' in there tomorrow," Brian said savagely, "when I kin see 'em."

"You'll never ride out again." Kern chuckled, and Kate Lawrence looked at him queerly as they trotted their mounts back out of range of the rifles.

CHAPTER THREE

Drifter and Devil

THEY were coming up toward the Anchor ranch house and he could see the yellow lights. A square patch indicated the barn door and smaller lights shone from the bunkhouse windows. George Brian slid from the saddle and walked quickly toward the bunkhouse, Kern following him.

At the door, Brian called sharply, "Tip?"

"Tip's got some lead in his belly, George," Kern heard a man say inside. "Tragan's outfit jumped us in the pass."

Kern heard the rest of it, watching Kate Lawrence run up to the house to speak with her mother, a white-haired lady in an apron, on the porch.

"They crawled up on us like a lot o' damned Indians," the Anchor rider was saying gloomily. "They shot down Tip an' Mike Conway from ambush. Mike got it in the shoulder. We skipped into the brush when we knew they outnumbered us. Then they let us come back an' take Tip an' Mike out."

Both injured men, Kern learned, had been taken into town for treatment, which reduced Anchor strength from eight to six. George Brian called him in and said casually, "New Anchor hand."

There were five men in the room and Kern liked their looks. The man who had been speaking with Brian went by the name of Sauer. He was a lean man, tall, dark-skinned, a little ashamed of the affair in the Canyon pass. This man studied Kern from head to foot and then nodded.

"You're walkin' into trouble, bucko," he said.

"I'll do my own worrying," Kern smiled.

Another man, squat, with brick red hair, sat on the bunk across the room. He said to Brian grimly, "One of 'em wanted to knife Tip after he was down. A Cross T man grabbed him in time. Little monkey-faced chap, looked like half Mex, long arms like a gorilla."

Kern Randall came around slowly. "Green-colored eyes?" he asked the redhead.

"Reckon I didn't get that close, friend," the Anchor rider said. "I was drawin' a bead on him in another place when they held up his knife. Went by the name of Escobar."

Kern didn't say any more. He stepped out into the darkness again, and he was thinking then of the night they'd brought his brother to the post, his back split open with a pick-axe, his dead face frozen in agony.

George Brian followed him out. He looked down toward the corrals, and said slowly, "Find what you were lookin' for?"

Kern said. "I'll know tomorrow."

"You figure on bein' in Green Canyon tomorrow, friend?"

"I'll be in," Kern said with conviction.

"You'll have company," George Brian told him.

SADDLING up a horse in the barn the next morning, Kern heard the light step on the wood planking behind him. He came around slowly and looked into Kate Lawrence's face.

"We're riding into Salvation at noon," she said quietly. "The train is due some time after one o'clock."



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Kern could see from her eyes that she hadn't slept much that night. He had an idea what Anchor meant to her—together with responsibility for her boys' lives.

Kern said, "You can't stop them from fighting for you. Neither can Tragan."

"No," Kate Lawrence admitted. She looked at him curiously. "Why are you fighting for Anchor, Mr. Randall?"

Kern bit his lips. "Cross T picked this fight," he said grimly.

"George told me about that," Kate stated. "Tragan wanted to pin George's murder on you after they'd killed you. Was that all?"

Kern paused. "That would be enough. But I'm looking for a man I think is with Tragan's outfit, a man who murdered my brother." He saw the pity come into her eyes, and went on grimly. "I figured on bringing that fellow back some way. If he's in the canyon I'm going in. Not much will stop me, short of hell."

An hour later he rode into Salvation with George Brian and the five Anchor hands. The train had not arrived, but they could see smoke on the horizon, far to the east.

"She'll be a half hour late," Brian observed. He turned to the men behind him. "Be down at the stockyard when she comes in."

Kern watched the tall Hank Sauer and the redhead, McLain, move across the street toward the Oriental Saloon. McLain was already moistening his lips in anticipation. The remaining Anchor hands tied up their mounts and disappeared along the main street.

"Have a drink," Brian invited, "to my weddin' next month."

Kern nodded. "Best of luck," he said.

"Sweetest girl in the world," Brian told him. He nodded toward the Indian Head Saloon a few doors down from the Oriental, and they angled across the dusty street. At high noon Salvation was very quiet, with only a few horses at the hitching racks. A buckboard moved down the street, kicking up a lot of dust. A dog got up from the hot walk and trailed after Kern, sniffing with little interest, and then went away.

It was cool inside the saloon, and the place still smelled of the previous evening's frolic. A swamper was mopping up the floor, and a single bartender slouched idly behind the long bar.

Walking past one of the tables, Kern noticed that a greasy packet of cards had spilled on to the floor, but that five cards still lay on the top of the table, faces down. Liquor bottles, half-emptied glasses and cigarette stubs littered the table.

Pausing curiously, Kern picked up the five cards and turned them face upward. One card was the jack of hearts. The other four

were aces and eights—the "dead man's hand."

Brian rubbed his chest gingerly with his right hand. He looked at Kern, and then at the cards, and then he grinned.

"I didn't draw 'em," he chuckled. "It ain't my trouble, friend."

Kern nodded. "Reckon it doesn't always work," he admitted.

Brian had his drink, and then headed for the Cattleman's Association office up the street.

"Be at the yards when that freighter pulls in," the foreman told Kern. "Wouldn't be surprised if Cross T showed up this afternoon to look around."

Kern watched the tall man push through the batwing doors. He watched Brian's flat-crowned sombrero move past the top of the window. Two riders trotted in from the western edge of town. Kern studied them carefully, noticing the brands on the horses' hips. They were not Cross T. He glanced again toward the table on which the cards had been lying. The swamper had already tossed them into a barrel.

HE WAS still at the bar when he heard the train whistle less than a mile away. He'd been thinking of Tom again, and once more the obsessing anger had its hold on him—had taken him into the past. At such moments the present did not exist for him, save as an unreal sort of bridge between what had been—and his ultimate dream of vengeance. He came to with a start now, realizing once again that this preoccupation might some day cost him his life.

He felt the sweat coming to his face. His face was cracking into a bitter smile when the bartender shuffled past, slapping at the mahogany with a dirty rag. He was a fat-faced man with wisps of brown hair plastered over a very white brow.

"Anchor?"

"That's right," Kern told him.

"Ace Bentley just came into Main Street," the bartender stated.

He lifted his eyes toward the batwing doors, and Kern came around without haste. The heavy-set Cross T foreman had already spotted Kern's gray gelding at the rack.

Bentley pulled up, indecision showing plainly on his face. Kern Randall saw something else there also, and it widened the grim smile on his own face. Bentley was a man of pride, and that pride had been somewhat damaged the preceding night. Ace Bentley was eager for action—too eager. Something—an old tension—loosened in Kern.

The bartender saw it, too. "He's comin' in," the bartender said even before Bentley slid from the saddle.

It was dark inside the saloon—Kern had

the advantage. He turned, leaning both elbows on the bar, his right hand hanging near the butt of the six-gun. He saw Bentley come up on the walk and peer over the top of the doors before coming in. Kern's steady gaze met the other's, and he knew Ace couldn't back out any more.

Bentley came in, heavy Navy Colt swinging at his hip, walking heavily, making the floor boards creak. There were no other sounds in the room but the slopping of the swamper and the ticking of a clock on the wall.

The Cross T foreman pulled up at the bar less than a dozen feet from where Kern was standing. He wiped his mouth with the back of his left hand, looked at Kern from head to foot and then ordered his drink. He came around then, smiling a little, eyes crinkled, icy blue.

"Still in town, drifter?"

Kern nodded. The bartender was standing directly between the two men, but behind the bar. Both his flabby hands gripped the edge of the wood, and he was ready to duck down on the slightest provocation, but still he liked this. Kern could read that much in his eyes.

"Not every man in this damned town," Bentley was saying, "can ride in an' shoot down a Cross T rider."

"You couldn't," Kern observed, "when I was working for the Cross T."

He saw Bentley's small eyes pinpoint with rage, then flash around the room, taking in the details. *I could kill him now*, Kern thought almost detachedly, but killing Bentley would not relieve the threat he represented, and might hamper his hunt. Almost, Kern thought, he could see Bentley's line of reasoning. The Cross T foreman was not a coward, but neither was he a solo gunman—he liked the odds on his side in a gun fight. Given the kind of advantage Bentley's momentary distraction had afforded him, Ace Bentley would shoot to kill. Kern kept his whole concentration focused on the man.

Finally, Bentley said, "There's a little trouble on Long Bow range. You don't belong. I'm askin' you to keep your damned nose out of it, friend."

He had given up immediate gunplay. This was a challenge nevertheless. Kern accepted it without emotion. He, too, could wait.

Ace Bentley had two cigars in the right vest pocket. He reached for one and tossed it over the bar toward the bartender.

"For you, Dick," he said.

The cigar bounced on the wood and rolled, and Kern knew his eyes were supposed to switch toward it, that being the natural reaction. He did let his gaze move from Bentley's face, but even then his right hand was closing around the butt of the six-gun. He saw the bartender duck with incredible speed.

Ace Bentley had gone for his gun—and again proved he wasn't up to a lone stand. He was fast, but his elbow banged against the bar, and before he could level it for the shot, Kern's first slug clipped off the tip of the cigar still in Bentley's vest pocket.

The force of the slug knocked Bentley back three feet, spinning him slightly. His gun roared, the lead driving into the wood of the floor, two feet to Kern's right.

Kern held up his second shot, smelling the acrid powder smoke, his nose dilating slightly. Bentley went down on his knees, shaking his head stupidly. He remained in that position, Kern watching him critically, while a man could count up to five.

Once the Cross T foreman started to bring up his weapon, but it had become too heavy for him. He looked down at it, dumbfounded, as the heavy gun slid to the floor. Then he looked at Kern, his thick lips forming the word, "Damn," before he slumped on his face. As he fell Kern could see the little hole in his vest directly behind the broken tip of the cigar. The cloth around that hole was getting darker in color.

"All right, Dick," Kern said. "All clear."

Outside in the street, there were no sounds. The swamper at the far end of the room had dropped his mop with the first shot, and plunged into a side room. Dick, the bartender, came up very slowly, his round head sliding over the bar. He looked down at Ace Bentley sprawled below.

He said succinctly, "That man's dead."

Calmly, Kern broke the gun and ejected the spent cylinder. It bounced on the floor with a metallic ring.

"Funny thing," Dick was saying, his voice quavering slightly, "Ace came in here late last night after the dance at Whalen's. He played a few hands o' poker, an' drew aces an' eights. Ace is superstitious an' he wouldn't bet on 'em."

Kern, watching the door carefully, saw George Brian bounce through, six-gun in hand, face tight. Brian stared at Kern, looked down at Ace Bentley, and then shook his head.

"You figure on wipin' out Cross T by yourself, Randall?"

Kern shrugged.

He heard Dick, the bartender, saying slowly, "Ace was pretty tough, but Tragan's just as tough an' plenty smart, which Ace never was. There'll be no room in this country for you an' Ben now, my friend."

The train whistle sounded again as the freighter moved through the outskirts of Salvation. Other faces from the street were looking over the batwing doors and peering through the windows. Kern pushed his way through the crowd, Brian at his side. They

rode to the stock pens without a word, both men thinking very hard.

CHAPTER FOUR

Six-Gun Salvation

THE other Anchor riders were waiting as the freight train slowed down. Through the bars of the cars Kern could see the heavy-bodied, black Galloway stock. The Anchor men stared at him curiously.

The Galloways began coming through the chutes into the pens, crowding, bellowing, tense after their long confinement. Kern watched them critically. They were not wild range stock, but they could run if necessary, and, with their weight, would run heavily.

An hour later Anchor riders were driving them a half mile south of Salvation, heading back toward the Anchor range. Kate Lawrence came up on a palomino horse to see the herd.

Riding point, Kern heard George Brian tell her what had happened in town. "Ben Tragan will never let that stand, Kate."

"Sam McVey just rode in," Kate said tersely. "Said he passed through Tucson—" Kern inclined his head to hear the rest—"McVey said Tragan hired a dozen loose riders around Tucson, and that they're heading north now. They should join up with Tragan tomorrow."

George Brian growled, "Reckon we'll have to blow Ben out o' the canyon tonight."

He turned to Kern and Kern said, "You say there's a line cabin in the pass?"

Brian nodded. "Big Jim had rustler trouble one time, an' he had the cabin built right in the pass to stop anyone comin' in or tryin' to go out."

"I have an idea," Kern said mildly. He glanced back over his shoulder at the lumbering Galloways. George Brian looked back, too, and then he started to grin.

"Rough 'em through?" The foreman chuckled softly.

"We'll come up behind, shooting," Kern said. "They won't know what hit them."

Brian nodded emphatically. "Once we get 'em in the canyon, an' have Tragan's mob on the outside, we'll let them do the worryin'."

Kate Lawrence stared straight ahead, and Kern thought moodily, *She's worrying about Brian. She doesn't want to see him get hurt.*

They bedded the Galloways a quarter of a mile from the Anchor ranch house, and two miles from Green Canyon. Kern, instead of going back to the house, rode over in the direction of the canyon. He approached it from the east, riding parallel with the range of hills which shut it in.

Smoke curled up from the pass, but he

could not see the cabin. Dismounting, he crawled up through a growth of young fir until he came to the canyon rim. He was able to look down through the trees into the pass. The cabin was nearly two hundred yards from where he crouched. Two men stood outside, and Kern recognized one of them as the blond Ty Boardman. He remembered then that all the Cross T hands were in on that deal to murder Brian and himself at the dance. All of them were as guilty as the dead Ace Bentley—thinking of that he felt something that was almost relief.

The pass was less than thirty yards wide, with the log cabin nestling closer to the right wall. Tragan had erected a kind of brush-work barricade in front of the pass, but it did not seem too formidable. The black Galloways could charge right through the stuff without any trouble.

He caught a glimpse of Tragan himself a few moments later, and then another man, short, long-armed, came up from the other end of the canyon, a Sharps' rifle in his hand, black sombrero pulled well down over his face.

Kern studied this new man carefully. He crept to within a hundred yards of the pass, and waited till he could see the man's face clearly. It was a brown face, weazened, cruel, a very wide mouth, smoky, cat's-green eyes. Kern lay down, face in the grass, breathing heavily.

IT WAS near dusk when Kern got back. He found George Brian waiting for him anxiously in the bunkhouse.

"I've been tellin' the boys what we're up against," Brian explained. "They're ready to ride."

Kern stared at the five bronzed faces in front of him. Sauer, the lean man, was watching him without emotion. Red McLain, the short man, puffed on a cigarette, and his fingers were very steady.

"They have a brush-work fortification in front of the pass," Kern said. "We can run the Galloways right through it, and then bust in ourselves." He looked at Hank Sauer thoughtfully. "That little chap goes by the name of Escobar is mine."

Sauer nodded, and George Brian said softly, "So you found him?" He looked at the other man. "This fight is evenin' up, boys."

Kern went into the kitchen and ate lightly. When he came out he saw Kate Lawrence standing with her mother on the porch. George Brian joined the two, and they spoke for some time, Kern watching them through the open barn door as he smoked a cigarette.

Brian had decided to move the cattle at one o'clock in the morning, in the hope of catching Tragan's crew asleep. In the bunkhouse

Kern found McLain and Sauer sound asleep, which was a good sign. The other three men were playing cards. There was no strain here.

Brian came in a little after midnight, tightening his gunbelt. He looked at Kern and nodded. South and McLain got up from their bunks and stood around the card table, watching the three players finish out a game.

They went out into the night and saddled up without haste. Kern could hear the Galloways out beyond the corrals, moving restlessly. Kate Lawrence came down to the barn and watched them without a word.

When they were about to ride off, she told Kern, "Watch George. He's a little too reck-

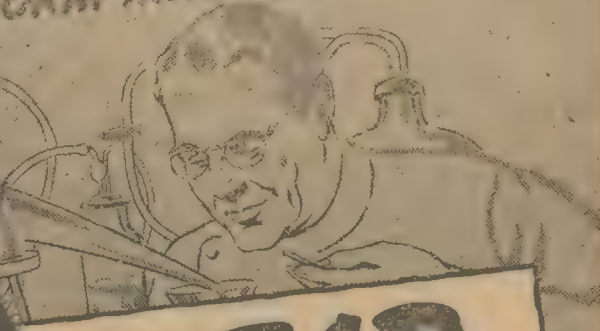
less—and I'm afraid to have anything happen to him now."

Kern nodded. He wondered how it felt to have a girl worrying. As he was riding away, Kate said, "Take care of yourself, too."

"Always did," Kern smiled.

They started the Galloways moving gently, making few sounds in the night. When they were within a half mile of the pass, a horseman rode out and challenged them. There was a sliver of yellow moon and Kern looked over the moving backs of the Galloways in front of him. These Galloways were hornless, and they presented a strange appearance, moving through this strange night.

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No one answered the challenge and Kern heard the rider curse and then spur back toward the pass.

Brian let out a whoop.

Six-guns scattered the silence, merging with other yells and the sea of strange cattle began to hump and heave. The Galloways bellowed in fear and broke into a short, lumbering run.

The Galloways were within fifty yards of the brush barricade when Kern saw the lights begin to twinkle all along the line. In a matter of seconds the lights had mushroomed into big balls of fire which sizzled and spluttered. The fire rapidly broke along the whole barricade.

Kern pulled up grimly. Already, the Galloways were swerving wildly away from the flames. George Brian swept up at Kern's side, face flushed, gun in hand.

"Tragan had that one figured," Brian grated. "He had gunpowder all over that brush—no goin' through there now."

Kern told him, "Get the boys," and Brian raced away. The Galloways were milling wildly now and Tragan's men had opened fire from behind the fire barricade.

Brian came back with his five men, and Kern said tersely, "Follow me."

He rode away from the Galloways, toward the side of the cabin nearest to the canyon wall. Tragan's gun fighters were yelling derisively, still firing into the darkness beyond the light of the fire.

Making a circle, Kern shot up the slight slope, dismounting among the firs. Gun in hand, he started forward on foot, running very fast, knowing that this second surprise had to be effective. He wasn't thinking of Tragan now, or of the Anchor spread or the girl who ran it—but of an ape-like man with cat's green eyes—eyes that would have to see through darkness tonight, to escape retribution.

Behind him, Kern could hear the Anchor men coming up, stumbling a little in the darkness. The red-headed McLain swore once as he stumbled and pitched forward on his face, but they kept going.

Already Kern could see part of the brush fire was beginning die down, and Cross T men were piling fresh branches on the flames. There was an open space between the canyon wall and the nearest fire—wide enough for a man to rush through.

KERN heard George Brian panting directly behind him. He glanced back, waved his gun once, and then dashed through the opening. The cabin was no more than fifteen yards from the wall here, and the first man to see him was Boardman. The blond rider was carrying a pile of brush toward the flames, but he yelled loudly, dropped the brush, and yanked at the gun in his holster.

It was Brian who shot him down, putting a slug through his middle. Boardman twisted as he fell, his head to one side, clawing at the air with his left hand.

Kern spotted two Cross T men dashing around the cabin at the sound of shooting. He fired and the lead man stumbled before he could get off a shot. Hank Sauer tallied for the second man—Bat Davis.

Kern continued down along the wall of fire, feeling its heat. He could see some of the Galloways on the other side. Most of the cattle had broken away from the fire, but some, confused, were milling in front of it.

Another Cross T man took a quick shot at him, and then scuttled away into the shadows. Behind him, Kern could hear the Anchor riders firing rapidly near the cabin. He found his man close to the opposite wall of the pass.

The little Mexican came running up, a Sharps' rifle in his hands. He was hatless, and sweat streamed down his brown face. He didn't see Kern at first, and he had his mouth open to yell at someone, when Kern called out sharply.

"Escobar!"

The Mexican pulled up abruptly, dropping immediately to one knee and lifting the rifle to his shoulder. Deliberately, Kern shot him through the forehead at a distance of ten yards. He put another slug through Escobar's neck, before the green eyes fell. The little brown man dropped directly into the burning brush, ten feet to his right. Sparks showered, ceased; then there was a sickening odor of burned flesh. . . .

Kern managed to grab the man's boot even though the heat seared his own face. He dragged Escobar from the flames and beat out the burning clothing with his hat.

They were still shooting around the cabin when he headed back that way, ramming in fresh cartridges as he ran. Another Cross T man was down, and then he saw the red-headed McLain sitting on the ground, holding his left shoulder, cursing to himself.

Hank Sauer spotted Kern and pointed with his gun toward the other end of the cabin, indicating that he would make a bolt around his side. George Brian was not in sight.

Kern raced for the corner, running full into a Cross T man coming the other way. He struck out with the barrel of his six-gun, knocking the other down. He saw George Brian then, on his knees, trying to lift his gun for a shot at Beh Tragan. Brian had blood on his shirt front, and his face was the color of clay.

Tragan stood in the doorway of the cabin, a little grin on his broad face. He was unhurt. "Tragan!"

Very quickly, and without thinking, Tragan jumped with the sound of Kern's voice. He

had his gun leveled and firing at Kern before he saw him.

Kern felt a burn rip across his right rib and knew that once again—perhaps for the last time—he'd underestimated Ben Tragan. He got off a single shot and wasn't sure whether he'd hit his man because Tragan didn't move. Kern leaped to his own left, throwing back the hammer of the six-gun again.

He watched Tragan lift his right hand toward his heart, and it was only then that he realized Ben Tragan was left handed, and that he was holding the gun in that hand. Tragan did not turn to look at him, and Kern held up that second shot. He watched Tragan fall apart very suddenly as if his backbone had been cut out and he had no more power in his body.

Three riders suddenly shot by, heading out toward one corner of the pass, going away from the Canyon.

Hank Sauer yelled, "They're runnin' like hell!"

Kern raced down to where George Brian was still squatting on the ground.

Hank Sauer came up then, gun smoking in his hand. He looked at Kern curiously.

"You got it, too, friend," he said. He pointed to Kern's face.

Lifting his hand to his cheek, Kern felt that it was sticky with blood. A passing bullet had broken the skin on his cheekbone—he hadn't even felt it.

"Get that stock into the pass," he told Sauer. "I'm taking Brian back to the ranch."

He wondered what Kate Lawrence would say.

KERN moved out of the pass slowly, holding Brian in the saddle as he rode. Gradually he saw the lights of the Anchor ranch house, and then Brian came out of his stupor.

"What in hell hit me?" the foreman muttered.

"You took a piece of lead in the shoulder," Kern explained. "I'll ride in to Salvation and bring back a doc."

"What else?" Brian wanted to know.

"Tragan's dead," Kern told him, "along with some of his hands. The others skipped, and Sauer is pushing the Galloways into the Canyon now."

Brian took a deep breath. "That'll make her feel good, friend," he stated softly. Then he added, "You should know her better, Randall. She's your kind—on the quiet side, but plenty of guts."

Kern didn't say anything. He was thinking, *It's a hell of a thing—I should know her better when he's marrying her in a few weeks!*

They heard a rider coming up very fast

from the ranch then, and Kern saw Kate Lawrence's white face coming out of the darkness.

"You—you're hit!" she gasped, and she was looking at him, and not at Brian.

"I'm scratched," Kern admitted. "Brian took a slug in the shoulder. I'm riding in to Salvation for a doctor."

She didn't say anything. . . .

He came out of Salvation an hour later, riding beside a diminutive, slope-shouldered man in a black frock coat. Doctor Hare was young and new to Salvation, but he'd evidently kept his ears and eyes open.

"Randall?" he said when they were up on the ridge outside of Salvation. "You're the chap shot up Ace Bentley?"

"I'm Randall," Kern admitted.

"Wouldn't be surprised," Doctor Hare said, "if Ben Tragan himself was dead by now."

Kern gave him a ghostly smile. "I wouldn't."

Doctor Hare rode along in silence, chuckling every once in a while to himself.

"What Anchor needs," he said next, "is a strong man to hold things together. That outfit misses Jim Lawrence."

"Reckon they'll have a good boss when Miss Lawrence marries George Brian," Kern said.

Doctor Hare was silent again. "Over Amy Wilson's dead body," he said then. "Amy just got back from Bowman."

Kern pulled up. "What was that?" he asked.

"Hell," Hare said. "Amy Wilson and Kate Lawrence are the best friends in the world. Kate wouldn't come between them for anything."

Kern said it slowly, forming each word with care. "George Brian is marrying a girl named Amy Wilson?" he asked again.

"I hear," Hare grinned. "They've been going together for fifteen years. I left word for Amy in town to follow us."

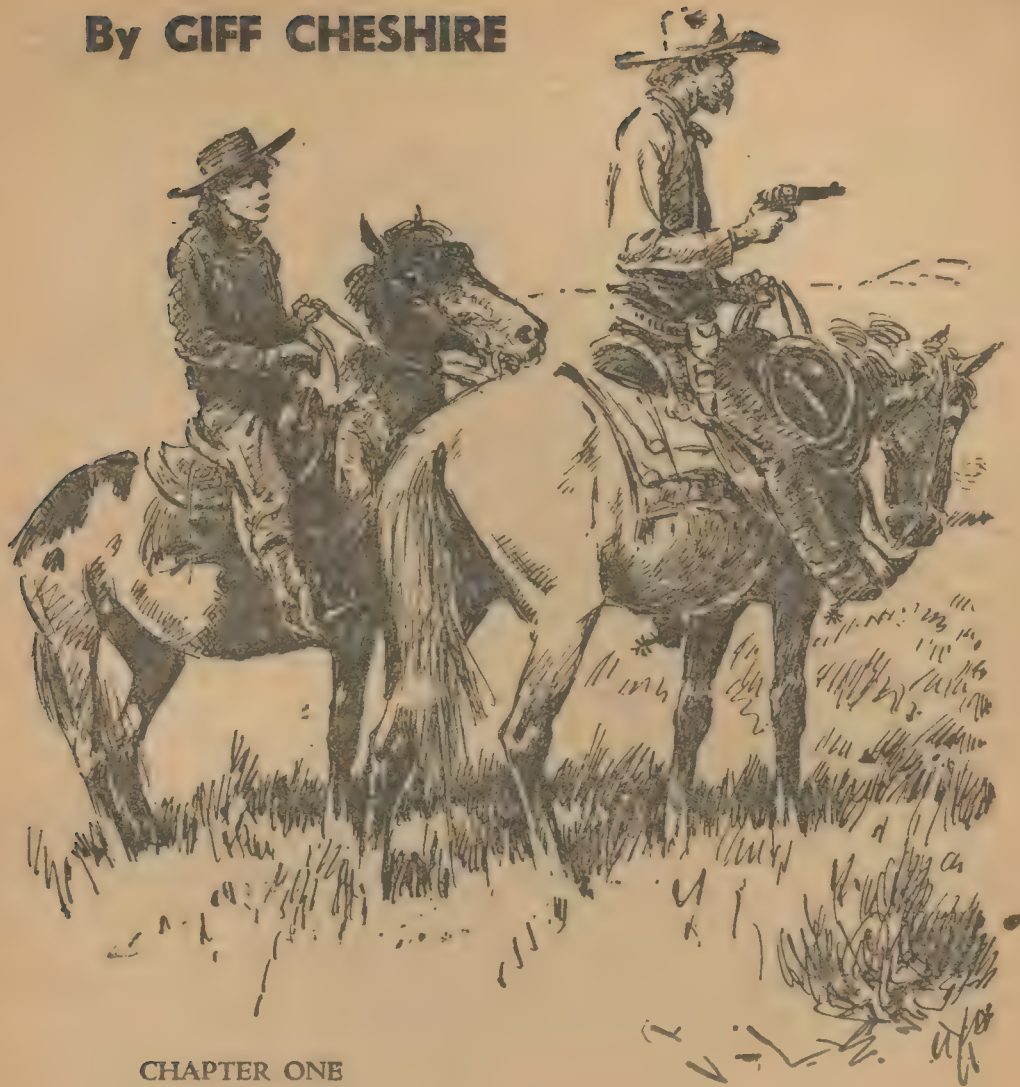
Kern let that sink in and when it had, he was curious to note how much of his driving bitterness had vanished—it was almost as if he'd found another, a deeper urgency than his thirst for vengeance had been. Kern Randall discovered that unconsciously he'd begun to push his mount.

"No hurry," the doctor grinned. "Everything will wait."

"It's been waiting," Kern observed, "a damn long time, doc. Now let's get along."

He rode on then with the breeze singing in his ears. On the eastern horizon he thought he saw the first light of dawn, but he knew that the dawn was still a long way off. It was an omen then—a sign of better things to come.

Kern Randall took a deep breath. For lack of anything better to say, he mumbled, "Push that damned horse, doc!"



CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Ghost of Baja Basin

FROM the reclining cane chair in the back patio, which some called the throne of Baja Basin, old Shag Chown could see the woman and read the veiled hatred in her eyes as she watched him, though he seemed to be paying no attention. She was cross and worn looking, though still in her late twenties, capable of continual brooding but not of taking action on it. Though Lucinda Chown's sullen enmity irritated Shag, mostly he held her in contempt.

"If you want to talk to me, Lucinda!" he growled presently, "come outta there and speak your piece!"

She left the wing of the rambling ranch house, in which she had isolated herself the

past two-three years, and moved across the polished tile. The old cowman had not liked Lucinda even when his boy, Dick, had been alive. She had been city-born and raised. She had never made an effort to fit in. She railed at the lack of facilities and entertainment and advantages for young Ricky. To him she was a woman who wanted everything handed her on a golden platter.

Dick's marriage during a vacation trip to Denver had been a surprise for old Shag and, it turned out, an unpleasant one. He remembered now how the house had to be built over to suit her taste and refurnished, how the old easy, informal living had given way to cheap fussiness and disorder. Shag had tried to endure it without sign of disapproval for



"You must be Shag Chown,"
the man commented softly.
"I've heard of you. . . ."

SWAN-SONG SIXES

Dick's sake. He had listened to her railing at Dick, wanting him to set up their own place in Chulick City. But the old man's real grudge stemmed from the time Dick, half sick with a cold, had ridden to town in a cold, windy rainstorm to buy her a present to bring her out of a tantrum. He got back with it, all right. But in three days he had been dead of pneumonia. . . . That had been two years ago.

Now she stood before him, tongue-locked by his severity, yet driven by her gnawing bitterness. "How much longer're you going to keep Ricky and me prisoners?"

The old man lifted white beetling eyebrows. "Prisoners? In your own home? You make a prisoner outta yourself, locked up in that wing reading your pesky paperback novels!

The gunpowder ghosts of Baja Basin had been laid to rest a long time ago—with Shag Chown personally attending their funerals. There could be but one reason for their riding out again—and that was to invite him to join them in boothill!

Get out and around! It'd be good for you!"

The woman's lips twisted into an ugly shape. "You know what I mean. Ever since Dick died you've kept me out here. I hate it, and I want to leave."

"Then why don't you go?"

"You know why! Because you won't let me take Ricky!"

"Ricky belongs here. He's my heir." He grinned at her. That was exactly why she was afraid to go. She had no money of her own and she was constitutionally incapable of earning her own living. She had no kin willing or able to help her.

"Dick must've earned something all the years he worked here!" the woman blazed. "Yet he didn't leave us a cent. You kept him strictly dependent on you, and now we are! It was your scheme—"

"Scheme, hell!" Shag answered, anger creeping into his voice. "I built the Half Moon into the biggest ranch in Baja Basin. Dick was going to have it all, when I died. Now it'll be Ricky! That is, if Ricky learns the cattle business between now and then!"

Lucinda caught the veiled threat, just as she had understood it before, and her cheeks flamed scarlet. "Ricky's eight years old, which means I've got to spend a dozen more years in this dreadful place to give him what's rightfully his. I want him to have advantages, education—"

"When he's ready to go away to school, he'll go!"

"Don't I have anything to say about him?"

Again Shag grinned. "It's been your own choice, ain't it, Lucinda?"

She whirled, eyes flashing, and ran across the patio and disappeared. Wong, the cook, shuffled from the other wing bearing a huge crockery mug. "Coffee, Mis' Chown!" Shag took it, his lingering glare sending the Chinese scampering again. He parted his snow-white moustaches and sipped the scalding black liquid.

HE WAS a huge man, though gaunted and stooped by age, and his movements were quick and incisive. It was his boast that he could still ride the toughest bronc to come into the sprawling pole corrals below the huge barns, could still lay a fast string of lead into a bull's-eye, could play stud poker into the dawn and down a quart of forty-rod in the meantime.

Yet this morning he felt old, though he did not admit it even to himself. Things had been going wrong for a long while. There was not only this eternal fuss with Ricky's mother, but any number of troubles in the vast basin that was his empire. Sod-busters were coming in, orchardists, riff-raff small fry. And now the railroad.

The thought of the railroad reminded Shag that this morning he had an appointment with the Chulick City lawyer, Ben Wadhams. Wadhams would be driving out in his fast rubber-tired buggy, and the old man decided to ride out to meet him.

Though of late years men had bowed and scraped to Shag Chown, he was still in the habit of waiting on himself. Now he strode to the corrals, caught up the lively palomino he liked to ride and saddled the animal. He had just ridden out through the lower gates when a young voice hailed him.

"Hey, Gramps! I wanta go with you!"

Half hidden in a clump of eucalyptus, young Ricky sat astride a pinto pony and grinned at his doting grandsire. There was none of his mother's weakness in him. Equipped with the rangy Chown frame and sharply cut features, he looked like a young imp as he came out of hiding. Old Shag chuckled to himself.

"That depends on if you blabbed them calves yet."

"All tended to."

The heir and the idol of the Half Moon was not indulged. His were the chores assigned to any ranch sprout, and in addition he had to master the many special arts his grandfather had undertaken to teach him—the insights and dexterities that had made a Chown the leader of Baja Basin, that had turned a forty-a-month cowhand into a rich man.

Ricky had already fallen into place beside Shag, and as they jogged along the old man asked, "What you figure to be when you get growed, kid?"

Ricky looked at him in surprise. "A cowman and a good one. Why, Gramps, ain't we always—"

"Just wanted to hear you say it, kid." It eased Shag, removing the small uncertainty the boy's mother had aroused. He knew the boy loved this life, and now peace of sorts came to him. Whether or not it caused Lucinda Chown unhappiness, this was Ricky's home.

They rode up a long, slight grade and across the crest, and the old man's gaze traveled to a quickening breath, as it always did when he rode among the immense things that were his own. A cloudless, deeply blue sky domed above the bare and slightly rolling land, now dry and sere under an August morning sun. In every direction he could see browsing cattle, each with the big C brand, slightly tilted, that gave the spread the name of Half Moon. By swiveling in the saddle he could see the big, sprawling adobe ranch house and great clutter of out buildings. In his mind's eye he could picture the many scattered line camps, each forming the nucleus of what would be counted a sizeable cattle spread itself.

Though the Half Moon was all he could

count strictly his own, Shag Chown's influence dominated all of vast Baja Basin, which embraced two other spreads nearly as large and any number of smaller ones. As easily as he could sweep the space that engulfed him immediately, Shag could run his vision back over the salient events in a long stretch of time. He had come into the Baja when it was wild and virgin, accompanied by two side-kicks, Mike Dooley and Pearly Frick. They had picked off the choice land in the locality and built the three big spreads. They had been leaders of the smaller outfits that filled in the interstices.

Six-gun law had prevailed then and the big trio had plied it without fear or favor. They had fought off predators and settled their own squabbles, and beat a harsh nature, which sent droughts, blizzards, and stock epidemics. Dooley and Frick were both gone now, dead of old age, with their spreads in the hands of sons who didn't measure to their sires' statures. All of Baja Basin was deteriorating. Small spreads had sold out to grangers. Barbed wire had elongated its evil way across miles of open country. And now there was talk of a railroad. . . .

A FUNNELING of dust descending the far slant told Shag that Ben Wadhams was coming. Shag waited thoughtfully beside the road, and when the buggy came up lifted a gnarled hand in greeting.

Ben Wadhams had never won his liking, but he was counted the smartest lawyer in the country. Now Shag had need of such a man. Tall and darkly handsome, Wadhams dressed to a slightly dandyish taste. His eyes were intelligent and cloudy with something that mystified the old man. He stood people off. His grin flashed quickly, yet it was more an instrument of persuasion than a gesture of friendship. But his reputation was sound, and that was what mattered.

After greetings were exchanged, Shag

looked at him and grunted, "What kind of luck did you have?"

"Fair. The Jacksburg-Western plans to run through the basin, all right. It'll be a matter of getting to the right men in the right places with the right persuasion—"

"Money, you mean." If a man was going to stoop to bribery, Shag thought he should be honest enough to say so.

"Well—it's going to be expensive."

"How much you going to need?"

"I don't know. But I'd like to have twenty-five thousand to start with."

Shag whistled. He pondered a moment, then said, "Well, in time it'll cost me a sight more than that, if a railroad comes through the basin. We'd better go back to the house and I'll write you a check."

Jogging north again beside the buggy, Shag felt his earlier depression returning, and he didn't know why. Then he realized it was his old prescience of coming trouble.

Wadhams commented, "The railroad's already run its location surveys to Chulick City. That's why I sent word I'd be out to see you, today."

"You don't mean it!"

"Afraid I do."

Shag shifted his weight in the saddle. Once out of Chulick City, they would be entering the outer confines of Baja Basin. So the thing he had been fearing and fighting was that close at hand! Yet Wadhams was a clever and competent man—the best to be had. For several years he had taken care of Half Moon legal affairs, and he seemed confident of his ability to reach men in the upper levels of the line's financing. He proposed a cynical approach—bribery—but Shag supposed it was the one most likely to work, and there wasn't much time. Much as he disliked the method, Shag's alarm for the basin had forced him to agree to it.

Shag Chown did not hope to stop the railroad from building, but he did want to get it located down the Piute river route, just south

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of the basin. In fact, with every ounce of his stubborn will, he meant to have it go that way. For he had no illusions about what a railroad through the basin would mean. Settlers, more farmers, and the end of the empire. He was willing to do anything to prevent that.

Back at the house, a little later, Shag gave Wadhams a check in the amount he had asked for, pursing his lips in distaste. The lawyer smiled, folded it, and commented, "I may need more."

Shag frowned, then tipped his head. "You'll get it, if it takes it. But I'd say you'd better get a hustle on. They'll have to turn south at Chulick City. If they're there a'ready—"

"The location surveys don't commit them to build," Wadhams reminded him. "I've made my contacts. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

He left presently, leaving the old man in a brown study. After noon dinner, Shag rode with Ricky to the Ten-Mile line camp, more to ease his restlessness than anything. They were returning from there when Shag pulled them up suddenly, his attention caught by four horsemen coming down a far slant. He waited for a long while, recognizing neither riders nor mounts, then he noticed they had observed him and were veering his way.

Dour and forbidding, Shag hunched in the saddle and watched them ride up. Young Ricky yelled, "Hi, strangers!" and the four gestured a greeting, but the old man did not change expression. He did not like the looks of this. All four wore high-laced boots, over which brown corduroy pants legs were bloused, and they had on brown shirts and flat gray Stetsons. This was an engineering party.

"Did you know you was on private land?" Shag asked sourly.

A man rode out from the bunch. He was lean and brown, probably about thirty. He grinned. "Thought it was likely, sir. I'm Hank Belford, chief engineer for the J. & W. We were sort of looking over the country hereabouts."

"You're not looking over this section, mister! You ain't ever laying your rails through these parts! Right now you're trespassing, and I'm telling you to git! And don't come back."

"Look—"

"I said git!" Quick as a flash a six-gun had left the leather at old Shag's hip and jumped into his bony hand. His mouth ruled straight, and his stony eyes flashed. There was every outward reason to believe he would use the weapon unless his will was obeyed.

Yet Hank Belford sat there, smiling a little, though with nothing disrespectful in his manner.

"You must be Shag Chown," he commented softly. "I've heard of you."

CHAPTER TWO

Challenge

"WHAT you'll be hearing next won't be a grinning matter," Shag snapped. "I said git!"

The men behind Hank Belford stirred uneasily, but the engineer didn't seem to move a muscle. Yet his eyes, which had been friendly before, turned suddenly chill. "You're being kind of foolish, old-timer, with your trespass talk! We can get the legal right to cross your land, if we have to. Rather not have to, for we're crowded for time. We're going to come onto your land to make some studies, and when we've picked our route, we're locating across it. If you're smart, you'll let your hackles down!"

"If I was smart I'd blast you down right now!" Shag barked.

"I've met your kind before, Chown. You're an anachronism—an old fighting rooster who's outlived his time. You can't stop progress, old-timer!"

"You heard what I said," Shag growled. "I'm telling you to get off my land and stay off. Next time, there won't be no palaver."

A glacial look set the engineer's face. "All right, sir, if that's your stand. But get this straight. We've met tough customers before. We know how to deal with them."

The party turned and started away, leisurely and talking among themselves, while the old man watched the retreating figures with mounting rage. Deep within him fear stirred. It was obvious the jigger knew nothing of a move to get the route changed to the Piute river. If Ben Wadhams had reached men in the higher brackets, word of it had not yet filtered down to the ones doing the actual building. Regretting he had not cursed Wadhams to faster action, old Shag girmed his mount and headed for home.

By breakfast time, the next morning, Shag had made his plans. He sat in the patio quaffing his morning mug of coffee, and Ricky and his mother were eating at the outdoor table near his chair.

Around a mouthful of flapjack, Ricky said, "Ain't we going for a ride this morning, Gramps?"

"Ricky!" his mother said sharply, "I wish you'd watch your manners! And you talk like a little tramp!"

"It's the way Gramps talks!"

"She's still right, kid," Shag said, grinning at the woman. "I'm a tramp."

Lucinda Chown tossed her untidy head and looked away. Shag fell back into his ruminations. He had decided not to rely solely on the success of Ben Wadhams. During the long, restless night his mind had drifted back over

the years, the violent years long ago when Baja Basin had been building. He proposed to ride over to the Hook, then to the Two Bar, the two spreads that stemmed from way back. They would organize and make a show of toughness, which would sober the Jacksburg-Western and incline it to listen to Ben Wadhams.

"I've got to run an errand this morning," he said, answering Ricky's question, "but I can't take you along."

Not if they were to make the fight talk he hoped for! Excitement was enlivening the old fibres of Shag Chown's body. He saddled the palomino and rode over to the Hook, catching young Tim Dooley before he had ridden out on the day's work. He told Tim of his plans.

Tim looked at him curiously. "But why're you so set against a railroad, Shag? Seems to me it'd be to the good of the basin."

"Why—" Shag roared. "If your father could hear that he'd disown you, boy! Mike Dooley wouldn't have to be told what a railroad'll do to us. More nesters—more down-and-out scum! They'll start cutting you to pieces. And you ask why I'm buckin' 'em!"

Anger stained the young man's cheeks. "Looks to me the advantages'd outweigh the disadvantages. It'd be easier for us to ship. We'd save the weight we lose driving to Tio Rojo."

"How you going to put on that weight if you lose your graze?"

"Don't figure we'll lose our graze. Maybe some of it, but not enough to hurt. Shag, you know I been studying this idea of growing rye grass and clover. It's beginning to look like a man can raise fat cows on a lot less land than they used to figger—"

Shag rode away from the Hook in black fury. Doggedly, and with diminished hope, he sloped out for the Two Bar. He argued for an hour with young Bud Frick. Bud was inclined to side with Tim Dooley, refusing to get excited, refusing above everything to have any part in trying to threaten the railroad. The old man turned the palomino toward home, finally, his burnt-out anger giving place to a deep dejection.

Maybe the fancy-talking engineer had been right, and Shag Chown was out of another time. But it had been a grand, exhilarating time, a time of sweat and blisters, of bullets and blood! Shag was deeply disturbed.

Old Shag was in a foul mood when he sighted the riders off across a stretch of marshes. Shag whirled his horse into the brush, stood up in his stirrups to examine them. Engineers—that smart-alec Belford's outfit. Without a second thought the old man lifted his six-gun and sent three fast shots over their heads, high enough to miss but low



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enough for them to hear the warning whisper.

He saw them jerk in surprise, halt their animals and examine the countryside around them. Shag kept cover, grinning, until they had spurred on, obviously nervous. Then he swung his horse out through the other side of the thicket and cut a devious course for home.

HE HAD ridden out onto the road and was moseying along it when he saw the buckboard come up over a hill ahead. Shag jogged along and presently recognized Jube Hornblow, who had a little spread under the Las Vistas, one of the chicks Shag considered as being under his personal wing.

"You hear about Ed Bates, Mr. Chown?" Hornblow asked, after a bit of small talk. "House and barn both burned down yesterday. Hit Ed hard. He's been having a string of hard luck, anyhow."

The old man was concerned. "You don't say! Now, that's too bad. How come he let a fire get started?"

"He didn't. Ed and his family was in town in the wagon. He was burnt out, Mr. Chown. There was tracks showin' some riders'd been there!"

"Hooligans? He been squabbling with anybody?"

"Ed Bates ain't got an enemy in the world," Hornblow answered. "He's a good-hearted cuss, and it's hit him hard."

Shag scratched his white thatch. "Well, you tell Ed to head to town and get whatever he needs. I'll send word in I'm staking him until he gets back on his feet."

Shag rode on home, feeling better. He had always helped where he could, and with no selfish interest. He and Mike Dooley and Pearly Frick had built a domain where men could feel they had security and something solid to hand on to their children. The railroad would break up that sprawling but tight-knit community. That was why it hurt him that no one but himself seemed very alarmed about it.

Yet he was puzzled. It had been years since anyone had dared depredations such as Jube Hornblow had reported. That sort of thing had been cleaned out three decades before, when the three big spreads had risen to dominate the basin. Its return, visited upon as harmless a jigger as Ed Bates, was hard to understand.

As he thundered into the yard at the home ranch Shag hipped in the saddle to look at the long-legged sorrel ground-tied by the house. He frowned, recognizing the horse as the one Hank Belford, the railroad engineer, had been riding. Then he caught sight of the two

figures standing on the long portico, close together as if they had been talking, now both watching him. Shag put up the palomino and strode back to the house.

It was Hank Belford, and he stood grimly beside Lucinda Chown. The woman appeared flustered, hurriedly excused herself and disappeared into the house.

A curious light glittered in Belford's eyes. "I've been waiting for you, Chown."

Shag nodded stiffly, remembering Lucinda's desperation. This man was one of her kind, an outsider, the first she had met in years.

"You ain't welcome here, mister!" the old man snapped.

"I supposed as much. I just rode over to tell you somebody took a few shots at my party, a while ago. You know anything about it?" When the old man remained in stony silence, Belford continued, his voice dropping to an icy level. "I thought it fair to warn you that from here on my party will be armed. They won't start any trouble, but if they run into it they'll know what to do." He picked up the reins and tossed them over the horse's head.

Shag studied him for a long moment. "I'm instructing my men to keep you off the Half Moon! You'll have to blast your way if you get across! You're running a big risk, Belford. That is, if you're a man of responsibilities. Or ain't you a married man?"

Hank Belford grinned, giving Shag a like scrutiny, seeming to guess his reason for asking it.

"No. I'm not a married man."

Shag knew then that Lucinda had found an ally. Hank Belford either had heard or sensed how things stood with her. Something that had been in the look that flashed between the two when Lucinda went inside, something now in Belford's chill though smiling expression, told Shag Chown that more trouble was brewing. Belford swung into the saddle.

"Too bad we must be enemies, Mr. Chown," he commented. "Your daughter-in-law and I knew each other a number of years ago, though I'd lost track of her. In fact, she's the reason I'm not now a married man." With another grin, he spurred the horse and went thundering away.

Shag stared after him open mouthed. Then there was no doubt Lucinda had told him her troubles! She would make a determined play to get him to help her get away with Ricky, and Hank Belford looked like the type of jigger who would lend his utmost effort. The old shoulders sagged, and Shag Chown went to his room to rest.

For all his private troubles, Shag Chown could not keep his puzzlement as to the riders who had burned out Ed Bates from crowding uppermost in his mind. The basin was his

responsibility and, in a sense, those within it his children. The next morning he rode over to the little Bar B to talk to Bates. He learned nothing. Bates had quarreled with no one, was as mystified as himself as to why he had been attacked.

Bates was fixing to go to town again to buy food and extra clothing, and to order materials sent out for new buildings. He tried to thank Shag for backing him.

"Shucks, son, forget it!" the old man said. "Was you shiftless, it'd be a different thing. The hard luck you been having ain't your fault. Just get busy and get on your feet again!" Nor did he try to take advantage of Bates' gratitude to enlist him in the fight against the railroad.

He was halfway home, skirting the fringes of the Hook when a horseman came smoking toward him up a long defile. Shag waited, knowing it was likely to be one of Tim Dooley's crew.

It was Tim Dooley himself, and he pulled his mount to a balled-foot stop, swiveled in the saddle and turned blazing eyes on the old man.

"Shag, about thirty of them young Herefords I had down below Squaw Springs've been shot dead! You know anything about it?"

For a moment Shag was stunned, for there was accusation in Tim Dooley's eyes!

"How would I?"

Dooley's bulge-bitten jaws slackened a trifle. "You was danged proddy when you left the Hook, yesterday! Sore at me because I wouldn't spout hellfire and brimstone with you about the railroad. They were shot on your range. Looks like they strayed over there. You never liked them Herefords, and I thought—"

Old Shag's temper shattered into a million pieces then. He giggered the palomino, and the animal reared back, and for an instant it looked as if Shag meant to ride Dooley down. Dooley's pony frisked sidewise, and the young man's hand unconsciously dropped to the butt of his six-gun.

"Dam' you, Tim Dooley, you're a miserable excuse for a friend!" Shag blazed. "Rattle your hocks outta my sight before I let one go at you. And you danged well better steer clear of me from here on if you don't want daylight let into your thick skull!"

It was not until he had pounded over the crest that Shag remembered he had not denied Dooley's charge, but had simply piled it with threats. Yet it was a charge not worthy of denial. He was almost home before his rage subsided enough for him to wonder just

who had killed those Herefords. He slapped his thigh and swore. And burned out Ed Bates. Likely the two things were connected.

Supper was over, and the blazing sun had slid at last from the sky and disappeared behind the far Las Vistas. Shag was in the shady patio, helping Ricky braid a horse-hair belt, when Lucinda Chown came out.

The woman wore a boy's gray shirt and a buckskin riding skirt and looked neat and almost girlish. There was a curious expression in her eyes, a secret elation.

"Where are you going?" Ricky asked.

"For a little ride."

"Whee—can I go with you?"

Lucinda smiled and shook her head. "You'd better stay and finish your lesson, Ricky. It's very important, you know, to learn all you can about a cattle ranch. Who knows but what you might save the herd some day through your ability to braid horsehair."

Shag stared. This was a new Lucinda, brittle, hopeful, secretly confident. "Tell Curly to saddle that Ginger paint for you."

"Thank you, Father Chown. But I want a strong horse and a fast one."

With a curious smile, she left through the far arcade, heading for the corrals. Lucinda Chown, who hated horses as terribly as she hated everything else on a cattle spread . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Blood on the Half Moon

SHAG had just finished his coffee and moved forth for his morning contact with Curly Younts, his ramrod. Younts was late getting to the detached little adobe structure Shag used as an office, and when he came in he wore a worried expression. Curly was a top cowhand of the old school. Though slight and now bent, he packed a cold command of eye and voice that made his word law on the big Half Moon.

"What's eating you, Curly?" Shag asked.

"Shag, Utah Reap just come in from the Wallaby line camp. Said he run into young Bud Frick on the way, and Bud's fit to be tied. Some jeebrows burned down his new hay stacks at his O-O outcamp, last night."

Shag stared. His own Wallaby and Frick's O-O camps joined each other, west of the home spreads. "You don't tell me! By damn, Curly, the time's come to find out about these hooligans. They'll be gettin' smart with the Half Moon, next!"

The foreman shook his head. "I don't like it, Shag! I ain't told you everything. This happened only a little while after dark. Two-three

riders in the bunch. Bud Frick claims one of his boys seen 'em getting away. One of the buzzards was riding a palomino!"

The old man came to his feet, his eyes rounding. There was only one palomino in the basin so far as he knew, his own Blaze horse. Bud Frick was either crazy or cooking up a stunt to start trouble or both! Shag's impulse to speak died in his throat as shock went through him.

Last night Lucinda had said, "*I want a strong horse and a fast one*—" Blaze was a spirited animal but not unmanageable, and in spite of her dislike of horses, Lucinda was a fair rider.

Shag's voice was tight. "Curly, was Blaze outta the corrals, last night?"

Younts shook his head. "I just can't say, Shag. I talked to all the boys. Nobody knows that he was. On the other hand, nobody can say he wasn't. Nobody ever rides him but you."

"I know. That was a foolish question. Reckon I figured like you did, that maybe we have a skunk on our payroll we don't know about."

"Something looks mighty fishy, Shag. I heard about them Hook Herefords being shot down on our side of the line. You don't like Herefords. You've bucked Frick's using creek water to raise haygrass. I gotta feeling somebody's trying to start a ruckus, trying to bust up the old combine."

They discussed the day's affairs, and when Younts was gone old Shag sat in his chair for a long while without moving. Some son riding a palomino must have come into the basin to carry on this dirty work. It hardly seemed possible that Lucinda could have caught up and saddled Blaze by herself. Yet Shag could not dismiss her desperate rebellion—or the elation that had shown clearly in her eyes the evening before when she announced she was going for a ride. Was she trying to start a chain of events likely to get Shag Chown killed, thus bringing Ricky into his patrimony at once?

Yet at Frick's there had been two or three riders. Hoof prints at Ed Bates' place showed there had been more than one. And Shag doubted that, even if Lucinda could muster the courage to ride Blaze, she could have brought herself to shoot several steers in cold blood, such as had happened over by the Hook. Yet she had been upset and wild-eyed the morning after Ed Bates was burnt out. She had been brooding for months.

Shag dismissed the impulse to talk to her about it. If Lucinda were really trying to rouse the basin against the Half Moon, with hopes of securing her own release and Ricky's heritage, she had help. A pretty woman would not find it difficult to enlist men in her cause.

Shag preferred to keep his suspicions to himself.

He likewise dismissed the idea of riding over to see young Frick to put him straight in case he suspected that palomino had been Blaze. Anger began to roil in the old man's blood at the quickness with which these two sons of his old sidekicks had suspected him. But there was one thing he meant to do to confirm his own suspicions, or to allay them. He would ride out toward the O-O camp and see if he could pick up the hooligan trail. Blaze wore a big shoe. If he had been out illicitly the night before it would be easy to prove it.

Shag was only halfway there, later in the morning, when he drew up Blaze and turned to watch a rider who had just come through the Little Elbow saddle in the hills and was spurring toward him. In a couple of minutes he recognized Ed Bates.

Bates thundered up. "Lucky I spotted you, Mr. Chown! I was heading for the Half Moon."

"You look like something was crowdin' you, Ed."

Bates nodded. He was a tubby individual, but his eyes were level and his mouth firm.

"Mr. Chown, I learned something else about that fire. I had to talk to you." He fished into his shirt pocket and brought forth an object which he handed to Shag. The old man's eyes narrowed. It was a weatherproof match case, carved from the shinbone of a calf, bearing on its side the familiar Half Moon brand. It was his own. "I found this layin' on the ground at my place!" Bates went on excitedly. "Looks like some jigger was using it to start his fires and lost it outta his pocket, somehow!"

"It's mine, but—but I ain't seen it for a long time." Shag had almost said the last time he had seen it in the case was on the desk in his office. He never carried it, except in winter when the weather was foul and he sometimes got soaked to the skin. "Well, Ed, you figure I burned you out?"

"You burn me out?" Ed Bates' mouth drew thin. "Mr. Chown, I figure that's exactly what somebody wanted me to think. Even if the Half Moon hadn't helped me out time and again, I'd know you're too smart to go losing anything like that on the spot. No, sir! I heard about Tim Dooley's heifers and him getting riled at you. So when I found this, I knew something was up, and I fanned my tail over to show it to you."

"Thanks, Ed. I reckon this cinches it. They's high jinks afoot, with somebody trying to get the Half Moon into blood trouble."

"You're dead right. I run into Jasper Ode coming over. He told me about Bud Frick's haystacks. He also asked me to come to a

meeting at the Hook tonight. I don't want to rile you, Mr. Chown, but you been good to me and I gotta tell you. A lot of the younger cowmen and some of the newcomers been against you for a long time. They call you the Baron of Baja Basin and claim you wanta run the whole shebang. They say you're holding the basin back. Now they think you're sore because nobody'll help you buck the railroad and you're doing all these things for spite. Tim Dooley even claims you're gettin' so old you've gone off your nut. I'm giving it to you straight, mister, because I figure you've got to do something."

"That what the meeting's about tonight, Ed?"

"Yeah. They're fixing to get together and put a stop to it. The Hook and the Two-Bar and the little spreads around 'em. They included me, on account of I got burned out. Mister Chown, it's sure working out like somebody wants."

"Yeah, you're right, Ed. If you'd looked at this match case and jumped at conclusions, like Dooley and Frick're doing, it would sure have put a spark to the fuse."

"If I can help you any way—"

"Thanks, son. I'll kill my own snakes."

THERE was now no need to pick up the hooligan trail as he had intended, Shag figured, and he turned Blaze back toward the Half Moon. It was likely that Blaze had been out the night before, all right, with an unaccustomed rider. For someone free to wander about the Half Moon home ranch had picked this match case off the desk. That could have been anyone of half a dozen different people. But he was certain now it had been Lucinda, with someone helping her. She wanted old Shag Chown killed.

The news that a revolt was making against him depressed Shag more than it alarmed him. He was amazed and chagrined at learning it had been going on for so long. Young sprouts, taking the things their elders sweat

out for them and despising them for it! It comforted him a little to remember the opposition was coming mostly from the Hook and Two Bar and the satellite spreads they influenced. His own wards, such as Ed Bates, were still loyal.

Shag straightened in the saddle as if he had been shot. Ever since he had talked with Bates he had been bothered by the question of why the under-cover workers had struck their severest blow at one of the Half Moon satellites. It dawned on him now that it was a clever piece of strategy. If Ed Bates had allowed himself to be deceived by that planted match case and spread the word among the other Half Moon satellites, old Shag Chown might have found himself stripped of his last shred of support in the basin.

Someone was trying to dethrone him, making a play for leadership of the basin! It looked as if Lucinda Chown knew who it was and had thrown in with the varmint, hoping to solve her own problem at the same time. Shag put the spurs to Blaze and raised big dust on the homeward trail.

There was a rubber-tired buggy waiting in the yard when Shag pounded in. Ben Wadhams heard the racket and came out of the little office. Shag was surprised, for the Chulick City lawyer usually sent word ahead when he was coming out. The old man turned the palomino over to a cowhand and stomped inside.

"What brings you, Ben?"

Wadhams sighed and sank into a chair. Shag fetched the whiskey bottle and a couple of tumblers and poured drinks. Wadhams studied his glass, then tossed down the liquor in one gulp. His eyes were red-rimmed and he looked tired.

"I need some more money, Shag."

The old man's jaw hinged. "Hell's buttons, Ben! Was only a week ago I put up twenty-five thousand!"

"It's going to cost another twenty-five. Maybe more." Wadhams smiled tiredly and



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put the empty glass on the desk. "It seems when you deal with bigwigs, you deal in big money. The J & W's started grading between Oroville and Chulick City, Shag. That engineer, Belford, is running his location lines straight at you. He's crowding the construction. If we're going to get anywhere, it's got to be in the next two-three weeks."

"But blazes, man—what've you been doing?"

"Listen, Shag. I've dealt with a man who's dealt with a man who's still got a man to deal with! That's what I need the extra money for. That's the way it is. We can't back out now."

Shag sloshed the whiskey in his glass, then put the drink down untouched. "We ain't backing out long as there's a show to get that route changed to the Piute river, but goddam—mighty—" with a sigh he reached for his check book—"how much of a chance you figure we got?"

"Well, it's getting tough. The company's already had a negative report on the Piute route from this Belford. He's supposed to be a crackerjack engineer, and he insists on Baja Basin. It seems that's why it's costing us more money. We've got to go a step higher up the ladder." Wadhams folded the check and tucked it into his wallet. "Don't get goaty, Shag. I never guaranteed it would work. I simply said it was the only chance. I'm doing all I can, and I still can't guarantee anything."

"This Belford hombre's holding out for the basin, huh?"

"Yeah, and I hear he's a hard man to beat."

Shag nursed a cold pipe stem for a long while after Wadhams left. He did not come out of it until Wong started pounding the big steel triangle to announce that noon was at hand.

Old Shag came to the dinner table in the patio with such stony features even Ricky deemed it inadvisable to talk to him. Lucinda Chown came out of her room and silently took her place across the table from the old man. Shag watched her closely all through the meal, noticing that though she managed to keep her features serene, her hands shook more than usual. She was up to something, all right, this woman.

Ben Wadhams had opened Shag's mind to a new possibility. All through the afternoon he planned. After supper that evening, Lucinda appeared once more, dressed for riding. Shag did not look up from his study of the Chulick City newspaper that Wadhams had left, but he took it all in.

When she had been given time enough to get away, Shag put down the paper and slipped carefully to the corrals so as to avoid young Ricky, who was in the bunkhouse listening to

the punchers' tall tales. Shag saddled Blaze and swung up. Scanning the horizon, he saw a dot-like figure break over a distant rise. That would be Lucinda. He proposed to trail her and do a little spying. For Shag Chown was certain, at last, that he was on the right track, that ahead of him rode a clever and deadly woman.

Shag rode away from the ranch at a tangent, but once out of sight he made a quick swing to the southeast and picked up Lucinda's trail. She was riding fast, as though some eagerness drove her. Shag followed her with practiced ease, taking infinite pains to keep out of sight, himself.

The rendezvous, Shag decided presently, would be that clump of cottonwoods. Sure enough, Lucinda made as if to ride past it, wheeled her horse suddenly and disappeared into concealing foliage. Shag smiled grimly. A tailor-made place for meeting a young engineer who'd probably ridden out from Chulick City.

Shag left Blaze in a ravine and approached the trysting place on foot. He came up on the blind side, and at the edge of the thicket he paused, letting his labored breathing subside. Then he bent his aged frame and stalked through the undergrowth.

At the first beat of voices he halted and listened.

"I tell you he suspects me of something, Hank!" Lucinda's voice was saying intensely. "At the table at noon, and again tonight—Hank, can't we leave now? I could have Ricky slip away first—the old man doesn't watch him like he does me—then I could follow, and we could meet you. Tomorrow, Hank—I can't stand it any longer! If he catches on, he'll kill us. I know he will!"

It was a moment before Hank Belford's answer came. "You've got to be patient, Lucy. You know I want to help you, but I'm responsible for building a railroad, too. Chown's going to cause a lot of trouble when we get here with the work. He may be a stubborn old coot, but he's no fool. It would mean just that much more trouble for the road. Endure it a while longer, honey—we'll spike the old pirate's guns—"

Shag straightened and came crashing through the brush. He disliked snooping, and he had learned what he wanted to know. He came into the opening where the surprised man and woman stood together, his bony fingers twisted around the handle of his six-gun—the gun lined on the man.

"Just stand still, Belford," Shag advised. "Lucinda, git on your hoss and hit for home. Belford, whether you like it or not, you're coming with me. We're going to attend a cowmen's meeting over at the Hook—both of us."

CHAPTER FOUR

Kidnaped

LUCINDA looked at him defiantly, but under Shag's steady gaze she broke and ran for her horse. When she had disappeared, Shag grinned at Belford.

"You going to make me trouble, Belford, or are you coming peaceful?"

Hank Belford's return grin was equally cold. "You can put away the smokepole, old-timer. I don't know what this is about, but I have no objection to going over to the Hook with you."

Shag put away the gun, but he kept a pace or so behind Belford while they got their mounts, and later, across the prairie miles to Tim Dooley's Hook spread.

Nearly a dozen men were gathered among the big scattering of buildings that was the Hook homesite. Most of them were hunkered down in the yard below the rambling house, deep in animated conversation. Tim Dooley and Bud Frick were the center of attention, with the smaller ranchers, who came under their influence, listening intently.

Shag Chown's emergence over the brow of a near hill brought them to their feet, and by the time he and Hank Belford had thundered into the yard, puzzled frowns and open glares were everywhere. Shag swung down, gesturing to Belford to follow suit.

Tim Dooley moved forward, his eyes questioning, his manner hostile. He started to bluster, then changed his mind, restrained by the fact that Shag Chown was an old man and had been his father's friend.

"We wasn't expecting you, Shag."

Like an old eagle, Shag turned his sharp eyes upon them. He looked at Tim Dooley, then he looked at Bud Frick, then his glance raked over the others.

"If you're holding a war council, I want in on it."

"Who told you we was holding a council?"

"I hear things. Drag out your bone, and let's start pickin'."

Bud Frick hurled the first charge. "I don't reckon you had to hear anything to know we was on the prod, Shag Chown. For five-six years you've bucked me and Jim for wanting to change things around a little. You've scoffed and talked against my starting Hereford blood. Same thing with Tim's idea for us raisin' hay. Then you tried to organize us to gun-fight the railroad. When we refused, what happened? Most of my new stock gets beefed—a lot of Tim's hay gets burnt! With the facts pointing to the Half Moon. Since you're here, you might as well know what this is about. You know you've lost control of the basin and you're acting like a o'nerly kid about it. But we aim to put a stop to it!"

Shag had heard all this from Ed Bates, so now he managed to hold his temper in check. He let his glance sweep for a moment to Hank Belford, then back to Frick.

"Now you clabber-brained sprouts can listen, for a change! Forty years ago Mike Dooley and Pearly Frick and me come into this basin. 'Twixt Injuns and white renegades we set on a hot lid for almost ten years. But we made cow country outa it. We built big spreads that you, Bud, and Tim and my Dick was to run."

"Seems to me I've been hearing that all my life," Bud Frick growled.

"Me, too," Tim Dooley put in. "So what?"

"So I've got a stake in what goes on in the basin! Maybe changing to Hereford stock is a good idea, Tim. My only squawk's been when you let your bulls run wild, mixing strains all through the basin. I never kicked about your raising hay for feed, Bud, but I did kick about your taking Cranberry Creek water for irrigating without making provisions to protect the water rights of the rest of us. Maybe I been high-handed and bossy, but if I have it's because I figured I'd learned something in forty years in the cattle business. If I've gone on the prod about that railroad, it's been because I know what it'll do to us. I've already argued on that and you wouldn't listen, but I'm still against it!"

"You've got a right to your views, Shag," Tim Dooley responded. "What we don't like is this spite work that's been going on."

Shag grinned coldly. "And you jumped at the chance to blame it on the Half Moon. So I brought this here railroad man, Belford, over here to explain that to you. It's your turn, Belford."

Hank Belford looked puzzled. "I don't even know what you're talking about!"

"Yes, you do. Burning out Ed Bates—burning Bud's stacks—shooting Tim's Herefords. In each case arranging something to suggest the Half Moon. Knowing how quick cowmen are to go on the prod when somebody tromps on their toes! The day I first saw you, you said you'd already heard of me. You knowed I was going to buck you, tooth-and-claw. I've ordered you off my land and armed and instructed my crew to keep you off. I've had reports you're a smart jigger, and one who usually gets his way. You knew in advance I'd give you trouble. So you organized these hooligan stunts to turn the basin again' me. If they worked, you might even start a bloody range war that'd get me wiped out. Then I reckon you found a new reason for wanting to finish me— Something that would be mighty to your personal profit. You decided to let yourself become somebody's tool. They'd made the plans and started the work."

A curious light had come into Hank Bel-

ford's eyes. He grinned, but there was wariness and rancor in it. "You're smart, Chown—but not smart enough."

"Because you think I can't prove it?" Shag asked. "Maybe I couldn't, to a jury. But I ain't the one who's suffered from your dirty work, except for being blamed for it. I ain't the one to run you down and punish you. I'm only trying to show these jumpy gents they've been too quick making up their minds, that there's somebody with a lot more reason than I got for stirring up trouble in Baja Basin!"

And he saw that he was succeeding, in part. Both Dooley and Frick were examining Hank Belford with hard eyes. "What you got to say to that, Belford?" Frick grunted.

With elaborate coolness, Belford pulled a calabash pipe from his pocket and began stuffing it with tobacco. He kept them waiting while he laid fire across the big bowl, letting blue smoke curl around his head.

"Just this. Don't let the old fox catch you in his trap. By his own admission he failed to get you riled up against the railroad by haranguing you. So what did he resort to? He pulled off this vandalism you've been talking about, and now he's trying to pin it on the J. & W. If you fall for it, he'll have accomplished his original purpose. He'll have the whole of Baja Basin in arms against the railroad."

Shag felt reluctant admiration for the man's cool thinking. Belford had realized that the antagonism running against Shag Chown would not be hard to restore. He had neatly turned Shag's charges to that purpose. Belatedly Shag saw his own mistake. He had not expected to convict Belford here, hoping only to prevent the man from provoking a blood-letting in the basin by exposing him and putting a stop to his game. He realized he could not tell these cowmen about Belford's relationship to Lucinda, his added motive for bringing ruin and perhaps death to Shag Chown.

For the hatred in the man's eyes was easy to read, a feeling put there by Lucinda Chown's whining complaints. Possibly the man had an eye on the money Ricky would come into upon his grandfather's death. Yet those were things that could not be uttered.

Shag looked at Dooley, then at Frick. "Well, boys, make up your mind. Who do you believe?"

After a moment Bud Frick grated, "Don't look to me like there's any question. Belford can get legal entry into the basin, so why should he organize a hooligan bunch? Your argument's too thin, Shag, so take warning! If there's any more dirty work, we're coming after you a-smokin'."

Shag swung into his saddle, knowing he could never tell them about Belford's personal

stake in the matter, knowing that the man had only to strike once more in his underhand way to bring bloody war to Baja Basin, ruin to the Half Moon and perhaps death to its owner.

There was only one thing left to do and that was to ride over to see Ed Bates and organize those who had lived so long under Half Moon protection. Yet he had ridden less than a mile through the gathering dusk when he turned back for home. He realized he had no right to bring them into the tussle.

The Half Moon could fight its own battles.

AFTER breakfast the next morning Shag went into a huddle with Curly Younts and told him what had happened. "You keep somebody posted to watch the corrals, Curly. Don't let anybody leave the Half Moon. Anybody, you understand."

"Yeah, Shag. I get it." The foreman scratched his head. "It's been no secret that Dick's wife hates you, but do you figure she'd take a hand in an affair like this promises to be?"

Shag shrugged. He couldn't tell anyone what his biggest suspicions were. Yet he had noted the fact that Younts' mind had traveled to Lucinda, also. It seemed crystal clear to Shag that Lucinda Chown had built the deadly scheme during her endless months of bitter brooding. A week ago she had been in Chulick City. She must have run into this Belford there. Belford had once been enough in love with her that he had never married. She must have told him her troubles and her plans. It had fitted in well with Belford's own ambitions. He had organized the hooligan band. Now things were going entirely in their favor. Another strike would come soon.

It would be a happening designed to send the Hook and Two Bar spreads on a six-gun rampage. It would be easy for the secret outfit to see that Shag Chown met his death therein. And the Hook and Two Bar would catch the blame.

Lucinda Chown did not emerge from her quarters all that day. A worried young Ricky went in to see her, and when he came out he reported that his mother had a headache and was in bed. Shag took this information with hard-eyed satisfaction. She hadn't seen Hank Belford since the tryst the evening before, so she could not have learned what had taken place at the Hook. Yet she did not want to face Shag Chown, which proved she had something heavy on her mind.

Then just before supper time Ben Wadhams came rolling out of town in his rubber-tired buggy again. They went at once to Shag's office.

"Well, Shag, it's flopped. No dice. They won't play."

Shag finished pouring the drinks and handed a glass to Wadhams. He looked at the lawyer narrowly. "Do we get our money back?"

Wadhams shrugged. "I sure as blazes demanded it. Seems some jigger up the line couldn't be reached. If we can choke that bribe money out of the pair I worked with, we'll be lucky. That's the risk in shady dealing. It's blamed easy to get the old double-cross."

A great weariness pressed down on Shag Chown. It wasn't so much the money—that had been a gamble he had lost. Now there was no way of stopping the railroad except the out-and-out violence with which he had been threatening Hank Belford. Things had come to a pretty pass in Baja Basin.

Ben Wadhams stayed for supper, and afterwards he and Shag returned to the office and talked into the night. Wadhams seemed depressed, also, and Shag lighted a candle and brought out a fresh bottle of liquor. As they drank, he watched Wadhams closely. An awful suspicion was growing in him. He had trusted this cold, solitary jigger with a pile of money. . . .

It came with the abruptness of a clap of thunder. The noise and laughter in the compound had long since died down as the hard-working riders hit their soogans. The lights in the big house had winked off, until finally only that one candlelit office window showed. The sash went out in a crash of gunfire—two or three shots in rapid succession.

Something hit Shag a terrific blow in the shoulder and, dazed, he bent forward and slapped out the candle. Wadhams swore and went over backward in his chair. Shag felt of his shoulder only long enough to discover that he had been hit and that it was wet with blood. He brought the hand to the cedar handle of his six and leaped for the door.

"Don't show yourself, Shag!" Wadhams barked. "Somebody's sure as hell trying to get you. Or me. Or both of us."

Shag hesitated at the door. There was no more shooting. Then he heard the pounding

of hoofs on the far side of the ranch house. There were shouts from the bunkhouse, showing that the crew was rousing. But by the time they could get horses saddled, the attackers would be well away.

Anyhow, this let Ben Wadhams out of it, for no man would be fool enough to target himself alongside a man he knew was marked for ambush. Wadhams had climbed groggily to his feet.

"Hurt?" Shag asked.

"No, but I sure as blazes felt the breath of that lead! What's up, Shag?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Well—me, I'm heading back for town pronto."

"You'd better spend the night."

"I'm armed. I'm not afraid of them cusses, if they're looking for me!"

Wadhams' buggy had been standing hitched since supper time, and Shag watched him light out for town. Curly Younts showed up.

"I reckon that's it, Shag!"

"Yeah. We're supposed to figure that was the Two Bar or Hook and come after 'em a-smokin'."

Privately he doubted that. Rather, he had a hunch it had been an out-and-out attempt on his life.

"You're bloodied," Younts remarked, when Shag relighted the candle. "Brother, that came close!"

Shag let Younts dress his wound, which proved to be superficial but which soon began to hurt like an all-fired toothache. Then he stalked across to the big house. Passing under the arcade, he paused for an instant in front of the door to Lucinda's room. The door was open. A faint splash of moonlight showed an overturned chair. Shag stepped into the room and thumbed a match.

It was empty. Shag wheeled and plunged toward Ricky's room, on the opposite side of the patio and next to his own. It, too, was empty.

Lucinda and Ricky were gone.



CHAPTER FIVE

To Ride the River With . . .

SO THEY had taken Ricky away from him at last. The effects of the liquor he had consumed had been knocked out of him by the attack, and Shag felt the weight of his griefs crushing him. Yet he knew he had to plan. He had to get Ricky back. After that he could think of punishment for those who were hounding him, of the basin that had turned against him, of his lost fight against the railroad.

Shag caught what sleep he could, knowing that intelligence would serve him better in this crisis than haste. He was up at the first crack of dawn. His flesh wound had stiffened a little, and he had Wong redress it. After a cup of coffee he went out into the yard. Curly Younts came toward him from the saddle shed.

Shag's one thought now was to find Ricky and bring him back. Belford had probably taken him and Lucinda to town, and Lucinda would probably hurry the boy on to some one of the cities for which she had yearned for so long. There she would wait for Belford and the word that Ricky had come into his heritage. It might be a hard trail to follow, but Shag was determined to follow it. And he knew that efforts to make good on last night's attempt on his life would come quickly now, would have to come quickly if the two schemers were to feel secure.

Curly Younts came up to him, his eyes cold and lean face sober.

"I'm going to town, Curly," Shag told him. "She's skinned out with the boy."

Younts nodded. "I been expecting it. But Shag, I gotta idea they didn't head for town. Looks like they mean to wait until they're sure the job's done here. Soon as there was light, this morning, I poked around a little. The busher, last night, fired on you from the side of the big house. There was three horses waitin' in the locusts on the other side. When they cut outta here they headed west. Toward the Las Vistas. That ain't even a good round-about way to town. I figure they mean to wait up there until the coast is clear."

Shag looked at him, his pulse stirring. If there was a chance they hadn't taken Ricky out of the country yet, he had to move fast. That was in the general direction of his Wallaby line camp.

He said, "Thanks. I'll take a mosey up that way."

"I'll come along."

The old man shook his head. "I can make out. Rather you kept a eye on things here. The hand ain't played out yet. If they come back, they'll come here."

Mounted on Blaze a little later, Shag picked

up the trail Younts had followed a short distance. There had been three riders, all right, and they traveled fast. It was hard to figure just who it would be. From recent events, he figured Belford had at least a couple of hard-cases carrying out his orders. These three night riders could be they, or could be Belford, Lucinda and Ricky. Shag aimed to find out.

The cold trail was easy to ride, for no deceptive efforts had been undertaken. It cut straight for the lower fringes of the mountains and, so far, straight for the Wallaby camp. Shag's brow began to pucker. He kept only one rider there at present—Utah Reap. He remembered suddenly that Reap was the one who had brought word to Curly Younts of the burning of Bud Frick's haystacks. Yet Reap had been on the Half Moon payroll for a long while, and Curly Younts liked him. It hardly seemed likely he could have tied up with Lucinda and her engineer.

When he became convinced that the trail was going to lead to the Wallaby camp, Shag left it and swung widely to his right, planning to use a safer approach he knew about. He came to Crabberry Creek and turned up it, following its course for several miles, then swinging left again. Finally he left Blaze and made his way up out of the canyon on foot.

He came out upon a plateau. A short way below him he could see the rear of a shack and small barn. This was Half Moon summer graze, but it was mostly picked over now and only a few animals had been left here in the custody of Utah Reap. There were several horses in the peeled-pole corral, Reap's personal string and others.

Shag's breath quickened. Among the animals was a sorrel Hank Belford rode, as well as a claybank that belonged at the home ranch, which Lucinda had probably taken the night before. They were here. Ricky would be here. Old Shag Chown knew that the show-down was at hand.

He skulked his way forward through the sparse brush, and when he reached its edge he paused, scarcely a hundred yards from the shack, to figure his procedure. Smoke rose from the chimney, and once or twice he caught a dark shadow on the window as somebody moved inside. He examined his six-gun and slipped it back into leather.

Turning his attention back to the shack, Shag squinted suddenly. Beyond it, in the direction of the main trail to the Half Moon, was an opening in the brush that permitted him to see a far slope. For an instant he watched a rider moving across that opening. It was Curly Younts. The foreman had disregarded his instructions to keep watch at the home ranch and had come to help.

Shag waited, figuring he might need it. In

a couple of minutes Younts came into sight again, riding into a small mountain meadow below. He had been joined by another horseman. Watching them approach, Shag recognized Utah Reap. Shag slipped through the brush toward them. When he was out of sight of the shack, he stepped out.

"Whoa up, Utah! You got company it looks like you don't know about!"

In a reflex of surprise, the pair dropped hands to gun butts. Younts grinned. "Criminy, Shag—I mighta plugged you."

Utah's eyes remained hard, and a sense of warning came to Shag. That jigger knew who was in his shack, all right. It looked as if he had been trying to draw Curly Younts into a trap. Shag's voice dropped to a deadly pitch.

"Or did you, Utah?"

With amazing speed, Reap's gun flashed into his hand. "To hell with this, Curly—"

Amazement surged through Shag Chown. A mask had dropped over Curly Younts' face, and he refused to meet the old man's eyes. Reap gestured with the gun, and Shag turned and started toward the shack. "So it's all been your work, Curly," he grated over his shoulder. "I'll say this much—you've been mighty slick about it. Hired yourself out to do the dirty work for a viper of a woman. Or did you fall for that pretty figger?"

"I ain't fool enough to get mixed up with any woman," Younts growled. "Shut up and go on inside."

Shag pushed open the door, and his eyes traveled instantly to the bunk on the far wall. Ricky was lying on it, trussed and gagged. Shag stepped into the room, and the others followed, shutting the door.

A DOZEN things seemed to happen then. As the door swung shut a figure leaped from behind it, catapulting toward Utah Reap. Shag wheeled, his hands reaching out toward Curly Younts, who was trying to fight off a second figure. Then there was a scramble of bodies all over the floor.

Younts' gun had been knocked from him, and Shag rolled with him, his old fists balled and hammering. Younts squirmed, kicked and beat back, but though he was younger he was no match for the old man. Shag got a grip on his throat, squeezed and shook until Younts stopped struggling.

Shag climbed to his feet, looking around dazedly. Over in a corner Hank Belford crawled off an inert Utah. Lucinda Chown crouched by the door, still panting. Shag's hand went to his holster and found it empty. His gun had been lost somewhere in the struggle.

Hank Belford was plenty mussed up, but he grinned. "You don't need that against us, old-timer! We've been tied up here since last

night. Prisoners of those two on the floor. Younts left just before daybreak to lure you into the trap they had set. They meant to bush you when you rode up the Half Moon trail."

"I mixed 'em up," Shag said, still bewildered. "I cut a circle and come up from behind." He gathered up Younts' and Reap's hardware and stepped back, a weather eye on the two.

"A good thing you did. They figured to kill Lucy and me and Ricky, too, so they talked freely. I managed to work my hands loose during the night, though I didn't let on. Then when Utah left to join Younts, I got out of my ropes and cut Lucy free. We left Ricky tied to fool them for an instant. We jumped 'em when they came back in."

Old Shag looked at Lucinda with reluctant admiration. "And a right smart fight you put up, girl. I thought for a full minute it was a wildcat—had a time shakin' you off that Curly so I could get at him! But—but if they wasn't working for you, what was their game?"

"I don't know, except that it involved killing you. Lucy and I met again last night, sir, in spite of your orders. I've been planning to help her run away. We heard shooting at the house. Lucy was alarmed for Ricky, and we started in. We almost ran head on into Utah Reap, coming away from Half Moon like the devil was herding him. He had Ricky, and the boy was yelling his head off. If you think Lucy put up a scrap just now, you should have seen her then!"

"Lucy," Shag said. "I guess I owe you a apology. A big one."

The woman smiled wanly. "I'm sorry, now. I know why you didn't like me. I don't even like myself, right now. I'd have done a poor job of raising Ricky if I'd taken him away from the Half Moon, like I wanted."

Hank Belford said, "We couldn't stop Utah Reap last night, sir, but we followed him here. Then we ran into Curly Younts, and thinking he was a friend let him get the jump on us. We'd made them a complication, but they talked about it freely in front of us. Reap did the shooting last night. He was supposed to have killed both you and Ben Wadhams. Younts cussed him out for failing."

Shag was stroking his drooping white moustaches. "H-m-m. They was after Wadhams, too, huh? Maybe that throws light on it. Wadhams knows my will reads that if anything was to happen to me before Ricky grows up, Younts and Wadhams was to be trustees for the Half Moon. I reckon I didn't trust you to run it, Lucy." He scowled.

"THEY'S still a lot of angles," Shag muttered. "Ed Bates' fire—the Hook Herefords—Two Bar stacks. Them two polecats probably done all that, but why'd

they want to start trouble between Half Moon and the rest of the basin?"

"I can answer that."

The three whirled. Neither of the pair stretched cold on the floor had yet moved. But a man had slipped up on the blind side of the shack and now he lunged through the door. He had a six-gun in each hand.

"Ben Wadhams! You crazy fool, what's the idea throwin' down on us?"

Wadhams grinned and kicked the door shut with his foot. "On account of the game isn't over yet. Drop those guns, Shag! Last night was the first intimation I had that Curly Younts was trying to double-cross me. You were only half right in your theory, Shag. Younts and I *both* planned to run the Half Moon for a decade, before Ricky came into his majority. But I decided to clean up a little for myself on the side, with the bribe money you advanced. I knew you'd get suspicious sooner or later that I hadn't turned it over to any so-called railroad officials. But it didn't matter, for you were scheduled for an early death. Unfortunately, I let it slip to Younts. He demanded half, and I refused. That, I expect, invited what happened last night."

"Right there's where I was getting suspicious," Shag grated. "But that threw me off the trail."

Wadhams grinned thinly. "Curly saw a nice chance for a double-cross. The original plan was to foment a range war, and he was to see that you died in it. But Curly saw that you weren't blundering into a trap like that, Shag. When he found out you were suspicious of the lady and her friend here, he got busy on his own. Perhaps you're wondering why I'm telling you all this?"

"We've been there before," Hank Belford said calmly. "Because you're going to kill us pretty soon."

"Exactly. My game's still good. Shag Chown's will has been in my possession for several years. It *now* reads so that, at his death, his estate goes to young Richard, with Younts and me as trustees. And in event of Ricky's death, it goes to Younts and myself, or the survivor. I think I could fix the scene here to look like you three shot it out with Younts and Reap! Or that your proddy neighbors got the pack of you."

"You're a cold-blooded son, Wadhams," Shag rasped.

"Practical, call it. And a busy man. So—"

Though a cold, half-insane light flooded the man's eyes, he never pulled the trigger. The gun was lined on old Shag, yet it seemed to buckle in Wadhams' fingers as the hand relaxed, then the buckling spread to the elbows, the middle, the knees, and the lawyer sagged to the floor.

No one had seen the object that whistled

past Shag and caught Wadhams dead center on the forehead until it clattered and bounced on the floor. Hank Belford sailed forward to wring the weapons from the relaxed fingers. Young Ricky sat up in the bunk, grinning.

"Mom, you said that one of the things Gramps was teaching me might save the herd, someday! He taught me how to untie tough knots and how to throw straight." Ricky beamed. "But carrying that old door knob in my pocket was my own idea and one you never cottoned to—"

THE mid-morning sun was waxing hot when the strange procession started for the Half Moon home ranch. Three subdued prisoners rode ahead, with Hank Belford herding them, a six drawn and ready. The girl rode beside him, and behind them came Ricky. Old Shag rode in the rear. He was tuckered, and for once he was glad there were young ones on hand to run things.

And that is what set him to thinking. Suddenly it didn't seem to him like such a bad idea to let the young ones take over everything. He had done his stint, and dad-gummed if he wasn't ready to take a long rest, all at once. It occurred to him that he was maybe eight or ten years too late getting around to it.

Shag sighed. The danger of a range war would be averted once this got spread around. The Half Moon would be at peace with its neighbors again. But that was all that had been settled. The railroad was coming through the basin now, sure as shooting. Lucy would marry her engineer, and they'd take Ricky away. In a few more years old Shag Chown would go to ride once more with his old sidekicks, Mike Dooley and Pearly Frick. The Half Moon would be no more.

Maybe that was the way things were in this world. Nothing was permanent. A man fought to build things the way he figured they should be, getting old in the process, so danged old he wanted to freeze things at that point and rest. But a man couldn't stop time and change. According to these young folks' lights, that was progress, and maybe it was. What an old cuss like himself forgot was that what was an ending point for him was a starting point for them.

Lucinda Chown fell back, suddenly, letting him catch up with her. She smiled. Shag reckoned he'd never seen a prettier woman than she was at that moment, and a liking for her warmed him. She was a fit woman to raise Ricky, and a fine woman for that engineer to ride the river with.

"I think I know what's in your mind," she said. "We're going to spend a lot of time with you, Father Chown. Ricky's got to learn the cattle business. He's got to learn to be a protective, fighting, *lovable* man like you are—"

GUNS ACROSS THE RIO

When killers and cutthroats took over the Border—the Rangers, too, became men without a country and wrote a gunsmoke chapter into international law!

By **HARRY VAN DEMARK**



DURING those thrilling days on the old Southwestern frontier there were numerous instances when Texas Rangers disregarded the law which prevented armed forces from crossing the Rio Grande into Mexico. When hot on the trail of Indians or outlaws, the turgid border stream was no barrier to the grim-faced men who were charged with keeping the peace from Brownsville to El Paso.

A notable instance was the sortie of Captain Thomas Rabb, Indian fighter, who pursued a band of Comanches across the river in 1858. Captain Rabb was at that time in command of a company of Texas Rangers.

Rabb had been scouting after Indians to recover stolen livestock. He struck their train and followed it with a force of fifty-one men. The party reached the Rio Grande close on the heels of the redskins, who pulled up on the Mexican shore and, after cursing their pursuers, dared them to come over after them.

If there was ever a time when a Texas Ranger refused to take a dare, it is not recorded in the annals of that tough body of fighting men. The Rangers waited until midnight, then the entire company swam their horses across the river. Captain Rabb with two of his men went ahead to reconnoiter. They found the Indians asleep. Confident that they would not be molested by the Rangers as long as they remained in Mexico, the savages had posted no pickets.

The surprise was so complete that not over seven or eight of them ever reached their horses, and not over three escaped, for the Texans killed forty-two out of an estimated forty-five.

The leader of the Comanches was a Seminole who had been driven out of Florida and had been made a chief upon joining the Southwestern tribe. He was a gray-haired man, said to be over a hundred years old. Because of his known cruelty to man and beast, Captain Rabb selected the old chief as his personal antagonist, warning his men not to interfere.

Rabb located the old Seminole shortly after the fight started and shot him through the temple with an old-fashioned cap and ball revolver.

Realizing that his pilgrimage into Mexico was a breach of the international code, quite at variance with his instructions from Austin, Rabb hurried back to Texas, secured an interpreter at Eagle Pass, crossed over to Piedras Negras with a duplicate report of what he had done.

When he called on the *commandante* of the Mexican garrison the *alcalde* of the town was with him. Neither had heard of the battle, because the first thing they asked him was how he was getting along in his pursuit of Indian cattle thieves. Rabb diplomatically replied that everything would be all right if he could intercept them before they reached the river.

To his amazement the *commandante* asked why he did not cross over after them. That, said Rabb, would be in violation of international law, and he had no desire to disturb the peaceful relations then existing between the nations.

"I think you should cross over," said the *commandante*. "I will not only approve your doing so, but I will recommend to *El Presidente* that he also approve it."

(Continued on page 51)

Curse of the Coso Range

Jose learned the gringo law the hard way—by losing his sheep, his dogs, his only friend. It was only right that the man who had taken these things should share Jose's last possession—the madness that men had branded him with!

OLD JOSE ARRIBA came into the town of Red Rock with a loaded rifle, for he had come to kill a man. It was not a vengeful mission, but a case of justice that the old sheep herder had figured out in his simple mind, there alone at the edge of the desert. He had figured out that Kendall McCord must die, but indecision was now causing a puzzled frown to add to the wrinkles of his face and he wondered some if perhaps he should not seek out Sheriff Foster for final advice.

Perhaps it was the long years with a father who had the mind of a child that gave Jose this sense of needing the approval of his friend the sheriff. Or perhaps it was only his fierce loyalty for the man who had come many times to the little cabin to sit and talk—the man who always understood and did not make fun of the childish little man who sat on the floor and played with chips of wood. The sheriff had known Jose's father when his mind was keen. He had known him before the lure of the Lost Mine had called him to the blistered canyons of the Coso Range.

Jose trailed his rifle in the dust of the street in front of Kendall McCord's office and his lips moved laboriously as he tried to form the letters of the McCord Cattle Company sign. The sheriff found him there.

"What brings you to town, Jose?" the sheriff asked in Spanish. "Have you trained your sheep to tend themselves?"

Jose shrugged. "I have few sheep. There are two dogs left to watch."

The sheriff laughed and slapped the old man on the shoulder. "You have few sheep!" he scoffed good naturedly. "You forget I know of two thousand and of the money you keep buried!" It was a joke between them, and Jose grinned. Always the sheriff tried to

make Jose take his small savings to the bank. The grin faded.

"Many sheep are dead," the old man said. "As dead as my father. There are far less than two thousand now." Jose turned and again puzzled out the sign. "This is the house of Señor Kendall McCord, no?"

The sheriff's eyes clouded and he studied the old Mexican closely. After a second he said, "You have walked a long way, *amigo*. Come have one small tequila and tell me about your loss. It is larkspur?"

Jose Arriba smiled. "For twenty years I have run sheep. I know the poison of weeds

McCord came finally, as Jose had known he would. He came out of the night, the firelight glinting on his pistol. . . .

as well as I know the poison of the Coso Range. It is the poison of Kendall McCord I do not understand." He walked over to the window and tried to peer through the smudged glass, but the sheriff took his arm and led him away. When the sheriff spoke his voice sounded tight, as if the alkali dust had settled in his throat.

"You come with me, Jose," the sheriff said. "I want you to tell me about it."

"It is nothing, señor," the Mexican protested. "Have you not taken enough time with the troubles of Jose Arriba? You and Doctor Coleman—always you tried to bring back the mind of my father—I will not bother my friends. I will go in and see Kendall McCord."



By THOMAS THOMPSON

But in his own heart Jose knew he must talk to this man first. He was a good man, this sheriff. Always he helped the Mexicans and tried to teach them the gringo law, so that they might know its protection as well as its pitfalls. So he went along to the small office at the end of the street.

The sheriff sat down at his desk and when he spoke his voice was low and kind. "Tell me, Jose," he said. "What do you want with Kendall McCord?"

"I will ask him for money," Jose said. "If he does not pay—" Jose shrugged and patted his rifle. "I will kill him like he kills my sheep. Is this all right?"

"No, Jose," the sheriff said. "It's not all right." He leaned forward in his chair and put his hand on the sheep man's knee. "You tell me everything and I'll try to help you."

Jose hadn't meant to take the sheriff's time. There was no need, he thought. But if the sheriff wanted to know—he told him of the riders coming in the night, sweeping down from the long sloping foothills into the sagebrush and grass flats. He told him of his wagon and the camp at Arroyo Sequit and of the color of the flames against the night sky; and of the many sheep which lay dead now.

The sheriff said, "Did you see any of these riders, Jose? Do you know who they are?"

"I did not see in the dark," Jose said quickly. "I was behind the rocks with my gun—but does one need to see the riders of Kendall McCord? Is it not known he is greedy for even my poor land?"

"You don't understand, Jose," the sheriff said patiently. "If you went to court you could prove nothing. There would be some who would believe you, just as I believe you, for Kendall McCord does not own every man. But if you could not prove anything—"

"Oh I do not go to the court," Jose protested quickly. "It is not good to take the time of the judge and of yourself. I will go alone to Kendall McCord."

"Jose," the sheriff said softly. "Do you know what will happen if you kill Kendall McCord?"

"He will not shoot my sheep any more," the old man said, flashing a smile.

"I will arrest you, and you will hang."

The old man caught his breath. Never had he been in the jail—always he had tried to keep the law. He did not water his mule in the city pond. Always he kept his dogs tied if he was in town—

"That would be murder, Jose, and the state says a murderer must hang."

"But he kill my sheep—he burn my wagons—"

"I know, Jose. I know as well as you do. But you must have proof. You must see Kendall McCord do these things you accuse

him of. Then we will arrest Kendall McCord. We will get a lawyer and you will get your money. That will be a happy day for me, too, Jose."

Jose Arriba smiled. "This is good, Señor Sheriff. We put Kendall McCord in the jail for a while and then we hang him, you and me. I will pull the rope, no?"

"First you will say nothing and go back to your sheep. I can help you better that way."

The old Mexican shook the sheriff's hand vigorously. "You are the very best man," he said over and over. The sheriff studied his face seriously.

"You have given me your word you will not kill Kendall McCord, Jose."

"I have given you my word," the old man said.

SO JOSE ARRIBA went back to the sheep camp, stopping only long enough to buy hard candy at the store and to peer once more into the window of the McCord Cattle Company office. Kendall McCord was there now, talking with Judge Cummings. Jose laughed to himself, thinking what a good joke it would be when the judge would have to send Kendall McCord to the jail. Then he went on down the street, for it was a long walk to the sheep camp.

There at the edge of town, just as it always happened, El Papagayo called to him. El Papagayo—the parrot—it was a good name they gave this one-eyed one, for he sat here on his porch and of every passerby he asked a certain question, never varying from year to year. Oí Garcia he asked, "How are your horses?" Nothing else. Of another he asked, "Does your corn grow well?" El Papagayo—just like a parrot. And like a parrot he repeated everything he heard. Jose Arriba saw El Papagayo there now, and he chuckled to himself. El Papagayo's one eye made him cock his head to one side when he spoke, and he looked more and more like the bird that was his namesake as the years went by and drew his cheeks away from his sharp nose. He had seen Jose now. "Hola, Jose! Have you found the lost mine yet?"

Always it was this question. It had been this way even with Jose's father before that one was caught in the curse of the Coso Range and came back from hell with the mind of a child. And Jose used now the answer he always used—the answer his father before him had used.

"Chango!" he said. "If I found the lost mine would I struggle with the smelly sheep?"

He went on, but he thought of El Papagayo's question, just as he always did. For a moment Kendall McCord was driven from his mind as he thought of the Lost Mine and its curse. For a long time now people had joked

—they said Jose Arriba went at night and looked for the mine. It was a joke they made and they all laughed. All except El Papagayo and Kendall McCord. El Papagayo still asked about the mine because he had always asked. He did not laugh. Nor did Kendall McCord laugh. Kendall McCord did not laugh about money, for to him it was like laughing in church.

Jose shrugged. Yes, he had been in search of the mine, but he had not found it. And now he did not want to find it. Had the Indios not said that one who searched for the mine would pay a penalty? Had his father not become as a child because he wandered too long in the heat of the Coso Range? Yes, he had been in search of the mine. But he would not go again. Even though he knew the secret of the water basin, he would not go again—

There was much time to think as the moon came up and sent long shadows down the gentle slopes of the hills and painted the sage in the flat land below. Not time to think of lost mines, but of the laws of the gringos and of friends like Sheriff Foster. The time would come when Kendall McCord would be seen, and then he, Jose, would take him to Sheriff Foster. That would be a good day. Sheriff Foster had said so.

The soft sounds of sheep at night greeted him when he came to the upper end of the canyon. He knew the bells and could tell by the sounds where his charges grazed. They had not moved since he had left. His dogs were good—and then, mingled with the sound of the sheep, he heard the creak of leather and the sound of hoofs against stone.

Jose took his rifle and hurried as silently as an Indian to where he could watch.

There were ten riders coming there, and they rode slowly, with the glint of rifles across their pommels. Near the edge of the

low swale they dismounted. There were growls from the sheep dogs followed by two shots. Jose closed his eyes and prayed for guidance. His best dogs—but he remembered the words of the sheriff and waited, straining his eyes. There were still shadows in the swale, but soon the moon would be high enough. . . .

The riders moved slowly toward the sheep and still the shadows of the night hid their faces. "*Madre de Dios,*" Jose muttered. "Do I have to wait to see my sheep killed?" And as if in answer to his prayer he saw the tall form of Sheriff Foster riding down the hill, followed along by a bright swathe of moonlight. Then he could see Ketrick, the foreman for McCord. And there was Villache, a mean one with his guns—and others of the McCord ranch.

Jose strangled a little cry of joy. It was as the sheriff had promised. He had seen the men come to kill the sheep—he had seen them kill his dogs. He could name their names in the court. And the sheriff had seen. Soon these *malos* would be in the jail and Kendall McCord would pay! He jumped to his feet, his heart thudding in his chest.

There had been a single shot and Sheriff Foster was bent over in his saddle, clutching his chest—another shot from out of the dark where Jose could not see, and then Sheriff Foster lay still there on the ground. The raiders mounted and lashed their horses off into the night and Jose went to his friend.

The sheriff was dead, and his killers had gone, frightened away by their own crime. Jose sat there on his heels for a long time, then he went slowly to the Arroyo Sequit and got a mule that was there. It was a hard task, but he loaded the body of the sheriff on the mule and started back toward the town of Red Rock. There was a tightness about his



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face now. Over and over he told himself that now justice would come. Now Kendall McCord would pay for his crime!

THE courtroom of Judge Cummings was crowded that day, and the heat from outside filtered through the windows and made an oppressive closeness in the room. Most men removed their coats, but Jose Arriba sat stiff and straight, his high collar pure white against his dark skin. Only once before had he worn this suit. That was at the funeral of the sheriff.

The judge came in and everyone stood. Jose smiled and waved, but the judge did not answer. Then they sat down and Jose was proud that all these men had come to hear him tell the judge to arrest Kendall McCord.

Jose knew he must not waste the time of a man as important as the judge, so he got to his feet and started to tell his story. A man took him by the arm and sat him down.

"We'll call you when we want you," he said.

And it was Kendall McCord who came forward then and sat in the big chair by the judge. There were two men came to talk to McCord—men who dressed in the ways of the city and who spoke words that did not make sense to Jose Arriba. Many times the judge would smile and nod his head to the two men, and sometimes he would ask questions of Kendall McCord. Jose decided that the judge did not realize how much Jose knew—he was asking McCord. McCord would tell lies—it was he, Jose, who would tell the truth. Again he got to his feet and came smiling to the judge, and this time the judge hit the desk with a wooden hammer and scowled down at Jose. Jose sat down and shrugged. If this was the way of the gringo court, it must be this way. It was as his friend Sheriff Foster would have wanted it.

It was afternoon before Jose heard his name called by the two men from the city. Jose came forward eagerly. Now it was his turn to sit in the big chair and talk to the judge the way Kendall McCord had done. Now it was time to tell the world that Kendall McCord must be put in jail and made to pay for the sheep. And that, most important, he must hang because he had killed the best friend of the Mexicans.

He started talking excitedly. The judge pounded on his desk with the wooden hammer.

"You will answer the questions as the defense counsel asks them," the judge said, and Jose could hear the anger in the judge's voice. He started to apologize. He was not familiar with the ways of the court. The two men came. These, then, must be the defense counsel.

"You say you saw men who work for the

McCord Cattle Company ride into your sheep camp on the night of October 4th?"

"Si, señor. They came to kill my sheep—"

The judge was pounding again. "Answer yes or no."

"Si, I saw them."

"Was there anyone else with you who saw them?"

Jose scratched his head for a second. It was hard to think. There was so much talk and so much big words—no, there was no one else. Except his friend the sheriff, and the sheriff was dead—

"Your honor, our client Mr. McCord has conclusively proved by his testimony that this man Jose Arriba is considered a man of—er—low mentality. I move that this case be dismissed for lack of evidence."

Jose did not know what they meant for sure. He did not care. Soon all the talk would stop and then he would tell the judge that Kendall McCord must hang—

And he was still waiting for his chance to talk when the people began to leave the courtroom and the judge got up and shook hands with Kendall McCord and with the counsel for the defense. He started to speak, but there was no one to hear him, and he wished desperately that Sheriff Foster were here to explain. He could hear the voices now—

"That crazy, half-witted Mex had a lot of guts causing a stir like this over nothing. Not even a witness—loco like his dad was."

They were talking of him—of Jose Arriba. They did not believe he had seen what he had seen. Something was wrong. It was not the way Sheriff Foster had promised, for there was Kendall McCord and he was inviting all to come have a drink at the saloon. Jose Arriba stood alone at the door of the court house. He wondered some if perhaps they were right—if perhaps his head was not good. For it was hard to make this seem real. Yes, perhaps he was crazy.

But not so crazy that there was not room for a slow anger to grow within him and tint his cheeks. His first thought was to take his rifle and go to the saloon where Kendall McCord and his friends drank, but the spirit of his friend Sheriff Foster seemed to take his arm and lead him past the door from which came the noisy babble of voices. The voices swirled around his head.

"Not even a witness."

"That lost mine talk—"

"I don't know about that mine," a low voice said. "There was talk of that mine long before there was a Jose Arriba—" It was Kendall McCord himself who spoke that last, and it was logical that he should speak this way. Kendall McCord was a greedy man. He had everything, but always he wanted more—Jose Arriba stopped suddenly and

pursed his lips. Slowly the anger went from his eyes and a crafty gleam came there. Crazy, eh? A crazy man with a lost mine—

He walked slowly up the street and as always El Papagayo, the parrot, called to him. "Hola, Jose! Have you found the lost mine?"

Jose wondered how many times this parrot had asked this. And he wondered how many times he had given back the same answer—that if he had found the mine he would not tend sheep. So many times that this new answer he gave now seemed strange to his ears.

He looked closely at the parrot and said in guarded tones, "I am selling all my sheep, Papagayo."

IT WAS easy to think here alone in the night with the silver sea of sage around and the music of the night. It was not like the confusion of the court where men spoke words he did not understand. Jose Arriba turned to his work. The money Sheriff Foster had teased him about was no great fortune, but there was enough, and he took it from the buried can and counted it slowly. There was enough to start the tongue of El Papagayo wagging.

The parrot greeted him when he came to town the next day. There was excitement in the one eyed man's voice. "You have sold the sheep, Jose?"

That was good. The question was different now. For the first time in many years the question was different.

Jose shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "It is not important that I sell my sheep. Perhaps I give them away—"

He went straight to the saddle shop and he

did not linger over the price. "Always I have wanted a saddle with silver," he said, paying out the money.

"But you have no horse," the saddle man said. "Surely you do not put a thousand dollar saddle on a mule."

"I will buy a horse," Jose said. "A fine horse. Perhaps the saddle will look best on a white one?"

He was careful that the man at the clothing store did not see that his pocket was now empty when he put on the new clothes. A jacket with embroidery. That was a fine thing. And then he rode the white horse with the silver-mounted saddle slowly down the street. The parrot's one eye bugged out and his voice was shaky.

"You have sold all the sheep, Jose?" the parrot said.

Jose Arriba flicked the ash from the long cigar. "Sheep?" he said. "I had forgotten the sheep. No, I have not sold them yet. Perhaps after I build the hacienda—" He saw the parrot stumble over himself in his haste to leave the porch and he could feel the excitement of the town on his back as he rode down the street.

He sat a long time by his fire that night, and the flame made colored markings on the silver of the saddle. The embroidered jacket and the wide-bottomed trousers he had folded carefully and put in his tent. They had served their purpose. Now he would wait.

Kendall McCord came finally, as Jose had known he would. He came out of the night and Jose could see the gleam of firelight on the barrel of the pistol.

"So you've found the mine, Jose."

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"I did not say I found it," Jose said, and he covered his face with his arm as McCord's hand lashed out and slapped him across the cheek. . . .

THE sun came up and outlined the two men on the desert and its heat urged them back to the shelter of the purple hills. But they went on. Ahead the Coso Range stood stark and naked with only here and there a jagged slash of red to mar its sameness. Already the heat was rekindling yesterday's fire in the broken layers of sandstone and in the colored earth itself. The Americano tilted a canteen and drank deeply. Jose rolled the pebble that was in his mouth.

He could tell by the expression on McCord's face when the canteen was empty, and he could tell by his own burning thirst of the discomfort of the man from town. He, Jose, was weathered to this sort of thing by twenty years on the desert's edge. But for a man whose throat was hot from last night's whiskey and who had lived a soft life—Jose rolled the pebble in his mouth and tried to find some moisture there.

It was afternoon when they reached the broken slope of the Coso Range. Here the sun beat against the interference of the hills and it seared the backs of those who rode here and then came back from the unyielding earth to sear their faces. Twice now McCord had started to speak but he made only cracked sounds. He had laughed once or twice and he no longer handled the reins of the horse he rode. There was a dizzy swirl before the eyes of Jose Arriba, but his mind was clear. He knew the canyons and the cut slashes of granite. He knew the spring.

The horse could go no further. The mule started from his spraddled stance, then wilted again as the gun shots fell flat in the hot air. No buzzards came to circle, for here the heat drove even these followers of misfortune from the sky. There were cracks in the lips of Kendall McCord as he sat on his heels. He was like a toad, Jose thought.

A toad who sits at the edge of cool water—

They came at last to the angry gash of red stone that stood like an open sore in the side of the hill. All the heat came here and made it a devil's oven. If ever a breeze had blown in this hellish desolation it had never reached the stagnant air of this canyon. And here Jose left the Americano to sit and stare, while he took the mule and went behind the grotesque tumult of balanced boulders.

Here, hidden in this sink of hell, was the secret of the Coso Range. In a basin of granite stood water—water that steamed with the heat, but water that was wet and fit to drink. Jose suppressed his desire to dash it

over his burning body. He drank carefully, and he held the mule back when it would gorge itself. Then he left the animal and went back to the man who sat and stared at nothing.

The water had taken the pain from his head and made his mind clear again. He could think, and he smiled cheerfully at the man in front of him. "Only a little ways, señor," he said. "Only a little ways."

Jose Arriba began his game of circles then—up through the jagged boulders too hot to touch—through the powdery white dust that caked the nostrils and stung the open cracks of lips—over the jagged lava that cut the boots to ribbons. And always like some grotesque lizard Kendall McCord followed until his hands were torn and blood marked every step. And he looked at his bloody hands and at his feet and he laughed—loud crazy laughter that bounded against the boulders and then fell flat to the ground in the oppressive weight of heat.

Twice each day Jose came back to the spring. Each time he would drink carefully, while Kendall McCord sat behind a boulder, so close that Jose could hear his gasping breath. Once, when he thought McCord would die, he had wet the man's lips and heard the gurgling sounds that came from the blistered lips. "You are like a little boy, Señor McCord," Jose said. "A very little boy—now."

But he was a bull of a man, this Kendall McCord. Another man would have died. It was near the end of the third day that Jose saw the change.

"You are like a little boy, Señor McCord," he said again and he could see the thing he had waited for—the curse of the Coso Range—the thing he had seen on the face of his father that day they brought him back from death. Kendall McCord's face was wreathed in the smile of a child. He sat on the ground and played with pebbles at his side.

The big man could not move, so Jose went and wetted a handkerchief and came back to bathe the lips and tongue of Kendall McCord. Jose was careful now. He had taken McCord's gun, and he had it near. Perhaps the life would return to this bull of a man—McCord's lips moved.

His voice came, cracked and thin and bird-like. "Water?"

"Yes, little boy, water," Jose Arriba said.

HE WAITED until dark before starting back across the open desert toward his own sheep camp. Then they went slowly, Jose on foot and Kendall McCord astride the water-logged mule. Sometimes McCord spoke, but always in single words. Once he pointed and said, "Moon?" And Jose Arriba nodded patiently as one does to a child saying its first words.

They paused at the sheep camp only long enough to get Jose's white horse and the silver saddle. Those he would sell in town—there was no further need for them. Then they went on, and the town was awake when they rode down the main street. Jose went straight to the house of Dr. Coleman. He was a wise man, Dr. Coleman. He had taken care of Jose's father.

"I found him on the desert," Jose said simply.

After a long time Dr. Coleman came from the room. "You saved his life, Jose," he said simply. "You should be proud. But his mind—you understand, Jose? It is like your father's."

"Si," Jose Arriba said. "I understand."

He went then and sold the saddle and the white horse. Before he left town he stopped to buy hard candy at the store and he paused to peer in the windows of the McCord Cattle

Company office. There was much commotion there and some men spoke of driving Judge Cummings and others from the town. Jose did not understand. Always the Americanos talked in riddles. All except Sheriff Foster...

Near the edge of town he heard the voice of El Papagayo, the parrot, sharp with curiosity. "Hola, Jose! Tell me the true. You have found the mine?"

"I go to my sheep, Parrot," Jose said. "If I found the Lost Mine would I struggle with the smelly sheep?"

He could see the bewilderment on the face of the parrot as he slammed the door and went back into his house.

Then, farther on at the graveyard, Jose Arriba paused again. He removed his hat as he stood at the new grave of Sheriff Foster.

"Thank you for telling me the right way, Señor Sheriff," he said softly. "I have do as you say. I have not kill Kendall McCord."

GUNS ACROSS THE RIO

(Continued from page 43)

To this the *alcalde* agreed. Then Rabb sprung his report on them. There was a good hearty laugh all around and both officials endorsed it and sent it by special courier to Mexico City. The President of Mexico had heartily approved the exploit, greatly to Rabb's relief.

IT WAS with considerable misgivings, however, that Rabb went to Austin to report in person to Governor Rannels of Texas. The governor was a blunt, plain-spoken man. He read the report carefully before he said a word. Then he looked keenly at Rabb.

"I see by the report that you are a captain."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you're a hell of a captain!" the governor exclaimed.

"I quite agree with you, sir," Rabb replied.

This brought a laugh from the governor.

Rabb then told of his visit to the Mexican officials at Piedras Negras, said he thought the extermination of the Indian cattle thieves was well worth the risk. Governor Rannels agreed, but advised Rabb not to cross the Rio Grande on official business again.

Early in 1811 Indians killed a stage driver and one of his passengers in Quitman Canyon in West Texas. Ranger Captain C. L. Nevill and nine men took the trail of the redskins and followed them into the mountains of Mexico, keeping close on their heels for twenty days through a wild and uninhabited region. They finally overtook the Indians, killed six and recovered sixteen stolen horses and mules. It is doubtful if the Mexican officials ever learned of the raid.

Before the railroad came to the territory

between San Antonio and the Rio Grande that region, more than 300 miles long by 200 miles broad, was the base of operations for many desperate bands of thieves and smugglers.

Ranger Captain L. H. McNelly and his company formed the flying squadron that subdued the lawlessness in that wild stretch of Texas terrain. The tasks they undertook seemed insurmountable to the state authorities in Austin.

In 1882 McNelly and his men engaged in a battle with Mexican smugglers that is still talked about along the lower border. A band of Mexicans crossed into Texas, stole a herd of cattle from the ranch of Richard King, and headed the animals toward the Rio Grande.

Captain McNelly was quickly informed and with his men took up the trail. They arrived at the river crossing a few hours behind the thieves and the stolen animals. In the face of dangers they knew awaited them on the other side, they swam their horses across and advanced upon the Mexican village of San Miguel, where the thieves had taken refuge under the protection of local government authorities.

Their advance was resisted. A fight occurred during which twenty-nine Mexicans were killed. After considerable parleying with the authorities, the stolen cattle were turned over to the Rangers, who drove them back across the river and returned them to the King Ranch.

Ranger Captain John R. Hughes had numerous encounters with killers and desperadoes along the border—and a score or more of notches on his gun, all put there in the performance of his duty. He was never known to show the slightest trace of excitement. He

(Continued on page 97)

Satan's Roundup



VALLON, being desert wise, drank as deeply as he dared. He felt the cool stuff slake his gullet—then he took the wooden bucket from his lips and stood there panting, swaying.

That was when a woman's voice came out of the hot solitude and said, "Good afternoon."

He shook his head, smiled, cracking the caked alkali dust on his cheeks. Voices, now. Hearing voices, he was. Well, a little rest in this deserted settlement before he went on. . . .

And then he caught her figure from the corner of his eye. He whirled, stared. When he saw her costume he blinked and kept staring. Words finally came.

"An angel!" he said, "A real, live angel! Ain't you a little out o' your bailiwick—way out here?"

The girl reddened, laughed and put her head to one side. "I belong here," she said.

He swept his hand at the cluster of adobe buildings, the square and the well in the center. "Somebody *does* live here, then. I thought them irrigation ditches weren't for nothin'. Looks like a purty spot, at that. I'd like to be stayin' here if a passel o' coyotes wasn't on my trail—" His eyes flicked over her quickly and a curious frown ridged his brows. "Lookee, ma'am—what are you dressed like that for?"

She looked down at herself. "Like what?"

"In that robe, or whatever you call it. You havin' a costume play?"

She was scarlet, now. "Why, no. All of the ladies here dress like this. This is Shalam, isn't it?"

"I dunno," grinned Vallon. "Is it?"

Vallon had come upon the settlement unexpectedly, but happily. To elude the posse from Las Cruces he had had to cross the Accursed Desert, hoping that way to reach the Rio Grande and circle north to Albuquerque. Haste was the thing—even so, he could stand for a moment and anoint his eyes with the sight of this girl.

She said, "You don't know of Shalam, then? I thought, perhaps, you might be a new follower of Shepherd Newbrough."

"Uh-uh," he said, and kept looking at her, enjoying what he saw frankly.

Her hair was the color of Indian corn and was drawn tightly from a center part into neat braids which hung before her shoulders.

Her skin was almost transparent, like Manzano quartz; her eyes were the dark, greenish blue of turquoise from the San Felipe country.

"Listen," said Vallon suddenly, "would you do me a favor?"

By the way she lifted her chin in response it looked as though that depended on what the favor was.

Vallon continued, "A pack o' mangy skunks from Las Cruces may come ridin' in here, led by Kling Durante. He's head o' the cattlemen's association and actin' as sheriff o' Dona Ana county at the moment. There was a coupla mistakes made and they might be lookin' for me. You can tell 'em, if you will, that I went anywhere but that way." He pointed west.

The girl said, "No one in Shalam bears false witness."

Vallon raised his head and lowered it again. "Oh, I see, now. Your Shalam is one o' these Bible hangouts. And that explains the peculiar duds," he laughed. "At that, ma'am, I believe it's purtier on you than a gingham dress—"

Her blush charged itself. She looked a second time at her robe and the tasseled cord which bound it in the middle. "I've never worn anything else." Then she looked back at Vallon's grin, then up and down the square a little warily and finally her head moved imperceptibly closer to Vallon's and she asked, "What sort of clothes do ladies outside wear?"

"Ladies outside? You mean you've never been out of this place?"

She nodded. "I was very small when Shepherd Newbrough brought us here. He got us from orphan and foundling homes in big cities." Her eyes brightened. "I wonder what a big city is like—"

"Holy sufferin' catfish!" said Vallon, widening his stare.

A HEAVY, deep voice came suddenly across the sun-baked square. "Nin'ya! who y' talkin' to? Nin'ya—git away this minute!"

Fear tossed a pebble into the pool of the girl's face. "It's Jurgen," she said quickly, quietly. "I—I shouldn't be here."

Vallon stared at the man crossing the square. He was dressed in a robe, a rough wool garment which swung behind him as he

||

*"There's no hangrope an' no killin'
an' no law in the place, pardner.
Only—no man ever leaves here—
alive!"*

||

**By WALTER
JAMES SHELDON**

After a while it seemed
there might be no end to
this...



strode. He was tall and a huge, red beard hung from a face that was a cluster of knobbed, heavy features. In a moment Nin'ya was gone and Jurgen was looming over Vallon.

"Howdy," Vallon said. "Name's John Vallon. Nice day."

Jurgen folded his arms. Where they emerged from his robe they were muscular and hairy. "Did y' come to see the Shepherd, stranger—t' join us?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Vallon grinned. He must have looked to Jurgen like an imp of Satan; a lick of blue black hair arched out from his back-tilted Stetson and even under the alkali dust the grinning wrinkles and the seared dimples in his cheeks showed. "I'm just passin' through. Any charge for the water?"

Jurgen kept his steady stare. "Thank the Almighty for it, stranger, and continue on your way if y've no further business."

Vallon shrugged. "Time to be gittin', anyhow." He tiptoed slightly and stared into the south. "Kling Durante," he said, "from Las Cruces may come ridin' by in a—" he stopped short, squinted—"by the great horn spoon, he's sooner'n I expected!"

There was a dust cloud, horsemen in it, perhaps five miles to the south. Jurgen swung his head heavily and stared at it, too.

Vallon looked around him, scanned the open country for miles around the adobe walls of Shalam, frowned and snapped his fingers. "They'll spot me surer'n catfish if I haul outa here now," he said.

Jurgen looked at him again. Deeply, pompously, he said, "We cannot conceal y' in Shalam. Nor bear false witness. And if it's Kling Durante after y', y've broken the law and—"

"Now, look," said Vallon hastily, "You've got to stash me away somewheres. I know what you Bible folks think about wrong-doin'—you've got to take my word for it that I haven't done anything wrong. It's a mistake, a bad mistake, but until I get it cleared up—"

"Stranger," said Jurgen, his eyes shining with an unrelenting light, "the wages of sin is—"

"I sure hate to have to do it," sighed Vallon, locking eyes with the man. He paused for a hair-fraction of a second and then his right fist exploded from his side and his long, lithe body trailed behind it. Range-hardened knuckles hit Jurgen's chin, sank into the red beard. It sounded like a large stone bouncing off a hollow log. Jurgen fell to his hands and knees and stared, unseeing, at the hot sand.

Vallon never bothered to look back at the man, he loped across the square and into the open door of the first adobe building.

There was one large room in the interior. It was cool and dim. Vallon had to blink the hot midday sunlight out of his eyes before he could see. And when he did he saw two figures at the far end of the room, staring back at him. One of them was Nin'ya, the girl in the white robe. She stood beside a large, heavy hewn-oak arm chair and in this chair was an old man whose white beard ended where his hands were clasped in his lap.

"Oh—uh—excuse me, folks," said Vallon, fidgeting on the balls of his feet. "Ma'am," he continued, "the fellers after my hide made better time'n I thought they would. I got to hide out somehow—"

The girl spoke to the old man. "This is the one of whom I told you, Shepherd Newbrough," she said. "Jurgen ordered me away—although he seems not a wicked man."

Shepherd Newbrough extended his hand. His skin seemed incredibly white and ill-fitting on his knuckles. "Come closer, son," he said.

Vallon took a few steps.

"Who follows you and why?" Newbrough's voice was soft, but with full timbre. Vallon felt that his whisper would have been heard in the vastest auditorium.

"Kling Durante from Las Cruces," he told the old man. "He'll get a ten thousand dollar reward if he catches me. But, Mr. Newbrough, you make me a stack o' your Bibles and I'll get on it and swear that I killed that man in Clayton in self-defense. It was only that—"

"If I should hide you," said Newbrough, sitting a little more erect and straightening the folds of his robe, "Durante will ask if we have seen you—and we may not lie in Shalam. We have no love for Durante here, but—"

"Look," said Vallon, "I'll be glad to pay you if—"

Newbrough smiled. His clear blue eyes became a little smoky, like mountain haze. "If it was money I wanted, I'd take the ten thousand dollar reward," he said.

Nin'ya put her arm across the back of the oaken chair. "Isn't there some way?" she asked. "This man is in trouble. Surely we are to help all who are in trouble."

Newbrough shrugged thin shoulders. "He has broken the law, apparently."

"If Durante is after him, he must surely have right on his side."

The old man put both his palms on the chair arms and, with surprising ease, pushed himself to a standing position. Vallon saw now that he was very tall. "I think there is a way," he said. "Fetch a counsel robe from the chest, Nin'ya."

"Yes!" she said. "I see what you would do!" She twirled herself around, ran to the

side of the room and brought from a large chest a long robe similar to those worn by Jurgen and Newbrough. She pattered back and held it out to Vallon.

"Don't that," smiled Newbrough. "Sit there in the far corner where it is dim, and keep your face from the light."

Vallon grinned widely this time. "Why, sure," he said.

KLING DURANTE swaggered into the council room of the colony of Shalam, Territory of New Mexico. He was a short, squat man, dusty and sweaty and scowling in anger. He took the length of the room in rolling, choppy steps, slapping the sides of his breeches with a rawhide quirt.

Durante was president of the Dona Ana County Cattlemen's Association most of the time, but now, during the absence of the sheriff he was the acting guardian of the law. He stood squarely before Newbrough, ignoring the girl who stood to one side and the other robed man who appeared to be sitting and reading in the far corner.

"All right," said Durante. "Where's this fella Vallon? Where've you hid him?"

"Mr. Durante," said the old man in his soft voice, "There are no locks in Shalam.

Not even on cupboards. You may look anywhere you wish."

Durante exposed his upper teeth and spat an imaginary something through them. "Ysidro, my Injun, picked up his sign comin' in here. And it don't go out again."

Newbrough shrugged. "Why do you wish this man?"

"He murdered the mayor of Clayton in cold blood, that's all. Thought he could hole up in Las Cruces, but I seen his picture on the poster and spotted him in town. If I'd been packin' my gun he wouldn't o' got away. Ten thousand dollars reward for him they're offerin' in Clayton."

"Ten thousand dollars," Newbrough smiled, "would explain your considerable interest in law and order."

Durante slapped his leg once, emphatically. "We can use the money," he said. "What with you Hallelujah shouters cuttin' off half the water for our grazin' land so's you can grow a few weeds."

Newbrough spread his hands. "There is land and water for everyone in the valley," he said.

"Now, listen, you mooning old medicine man," shouted Durante, jabbing a stocky finger forward, "Enough o' that. Where's this ranny, Vallon?"

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batteries GO DEAD
just lying around-

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Someone came through the open door behind Durante, a dark-skinned, small man, black hair falling over his eyes. He walked to Durante's side and whispered something. Durante whirled on him. "*Eso es verdad? Has buscado en todos los lugares?*"

"Si, si," said the man, nodding vigorously.

Durante snapped his eyes back to Newbrough. "You've hidden him well if Ysidro can't find him," he said. "But I'll find him if I have to hack down every mud hut in this hole—"

"There's a law in this country now," Newbrough reminded him gently.

"All right, Newbrough." Durante shook his quirt. "I'm through jawin'. I know Vallon was here. I just talked to Jurgen outside and he saw Vallon. So you ain't foxin' me a bit."

Newbrough shrugged, spread his hands wryly.

The rancher turned, walked out of the room with the same choppy steps, Ysidro padding behind him. A moment later the sound of men and horses departing came through the open door. Vallon got up from the corner and crossed to the oaken chair.

He put out his hand, grasped Newbrough's warmly. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks." He slapped the lick of hair back from his forehead. "Durante doesn't like you folks much, eh?"

Newbrough shook his white-maned head. "He's tried to buy us out many times. He's pleaded with, threatened and annoyed us. I fear what he will do now."

"I'm just wonderin' something," said Vallon, tilting his head and frowning. "I'm just wonderin' if maybe I can't repay you a little for keepin' Durante off my neck."

"There was no thought of repayment, my son. Besides, we did nothing."

"Look," said Vallon intently, "I saw some of your irrigation when I came into the place. It's no wonder you're dryin' up Durante's cattle land. Listen—I think I can show you how to do this thing so everybody in the valley'll have all the water they need—"

Newbrough stared levelly for a moment. "Perhaps," he said finally, "your steps were directed here."

There was a scuffling step at the doorway. Vallon turned and saw the huge, red-bearded figure of Jurgen looming in it. Jurgen saw the outlaw and his red beard came apart, showing a gaping mouth. "What—what have you done here, Shepherd Newbrough?" His voice shook the walls of the room.

Newbrough smiled. "I merely failed to turn him over to Durante's sinful hands."

"But this man has killed! His soul is stained with blood and you let him stand in the same room with Nin'ya, the innocent!"

Newbrough said quietly, but still smiling, "I think I can see in a man's eyes if he has sinned. I think this man has not."

"And I, too!" said Nin'ya lifting her chin toward Jurgen.

The red-bearded man stood for a full moment looking back and forth among the other three. Then he sighed heavily. "Very well," he said. "It is as y' wish. But I'm ridin' into Las Cruces this afternoon to book seats on the stage for Nin'ya and myself."

Vallon heard the girl's breath catch. "So soon, Jurgen?" she said. He looked at her face and saw that the white, translucent skin had tightened.

"The time has come," said Jurgen.

Newbrough held the arms of the chair in his hands tightly.

"It is for you to say, Jurgen," he said.

Jurgen said, "Come with me, Nin'ya," and turned and disappeared through the doorway.

The girl gave Newbrough one look—Vallon thought he saw terror flicker in her eyes—Newbrough looked back at her but said nothing. She stared at him a moment more, as though hoping he might tell her not to go, and then she took her arm from the chair and walked slowly in Jurgen's wake.

"Yes," said Newbrough quietly, "The time has come."

VALLON watched the afternoon sun duck coyly behind the peaks to the west and then wink at the world through a gap in them. He was in a small draw not far from the adobe settlement; he sat on a boulder there poking at a pebble with a dried piñon branch.

For the second time that day Nin'ya's voice broke suddenly and unexpectedly into his solitude. This time there was a bowstring tautness to it.

"Mr. Vallon!"

He looked up, saw her come toward him, her white robe swirling with her steps. He had wondered where she had gotten to—where Jurgen was to take her and why—these were some of the things that Newbrough had not yet explained. All afternoon he had wandered about the settlement and its environs with the old man, talking of dams and sluices and growing things. Newbrough had come to this valley fifteen years ago with a score of children from institutions in the East. These children were to grow into a new race of people who knew not so much as the meaning of the word "evil." Philosophical stuff, that, and not much in Vallon's line, but there was no mistaking Newbrough's sincerity. At any rate, Nin'ya—unbelievably innocent Nin'ya, was one of these children who had lived most of their lives in Shalam. He turned to her now, smiled, and held out

his hands. Quite unaffectedly she took both of them and sat on the rock beside him.

"I want to talk to you," she said, "before I go away with Jurgen. There are things I want to know—Jurgen, nor Shepherd Newbrough will tell me. But you can. Things about the outside world. What will I see? What will it—"

"Why are you going away with Jurgen?" interrupted Vallon.

"The time has come for me," she said. "It comes for every girl in Shalam, to go away and become the wife of one of Shalam's men. I have been chosen for Jurgen. It is only at this time that we are taken to see the world outside. I think—I think that I am afraid of it."

His grip on her hands tightened. Quite accidentally—or was it—he moved toward her. She made no move to pull away.

Vallon said, "The outside is a funny place, Nin'ya. Men're always runnin' like fools but gettin' nowhere. Me, for instance. I was an engineer. I don't suppose you'd even know what that is. But I went to a big school to learn how to build dams and sluiceways and how to move mountains to one side. Then I came back to the West—it was my country the West; I was raised in cowpunchers' bunk-houses and Navajo's *hogans*—well, I came back West and all of a sudden I found I'd killed somebody. He was drunk, Nin'ya, and I don't suppose you know what that is, either. Drunk and quarrelsome. I tried to shoot him in the leg, but someone knocked my gun up. Turned out he was the mayor and that was just too bad for me. And I guess you don't know what an outlaw is—but that's me, that's what I am, now."

He was even closer to her now, he could feel the warmth of her breath, look very closely into those turquoise eyes. She said, "I feel—I feel so strange!"

Vallon felt his heart against his ribs. His stomach seemed suddenly empty and overturned. The blood in his wrists and ankles

tingled. He knew, even as he bent forward, that this was wrong; he should not be doing this. But—

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips on hers.

She didn't move. They held that way for a long moment. Then he drew his head back slowly.

"I—" he said haltingly, very hot in the cheeks—"I oughn't to have done that."

Nin'ya's eyes were very wide and her lips were parted a little. And then suddenly Vallon knew that someone was watching; he could feel eyes. . . .

HE TURNED and saw Jurgen standing not fifty feet away. His fists were on his hips and his red beard stirred a little in the breeze.

There was a moment of shattering quiet and then Jurgen roared, "Nin'ya, go back at once!"

She obeyed automatically. Vallon caught one glimpse of her white, drawn face before she disappeared from the draw.

Jurgen began to come forward. "I warned Newbrough against ye," he said. "I thought y'd bring shame to Shalam if ye had the chance!"

Vallon stared then, and saw Jurgen's hand creep under his homespun robe and come out again with a six-gun in it. He said, "I didn't think you were all Bible fella, Jurgen."

The red-bearded man ignored him. He kept coming forward until he stood only a few steps from Vallon. He pointed the gun.

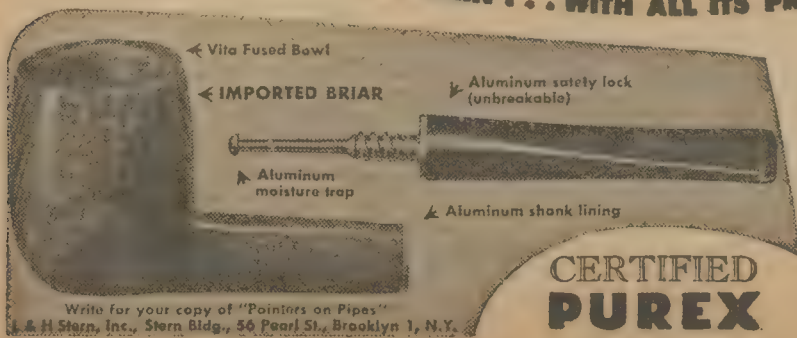
Vallon stood up, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. He measured the distance between Jurgen and himself. One good, quick leap would span it.

And then Jurgen said, "When Durante comes back here, he's goin' to find y' dead, Vallon. It won't make no difference. I saw the poster in Las Cruces this afternoon. It says 'Dead or Alive.'"

"You told Durante I was here?"

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Jurgen shrugged. "He knew y' were here. I told him I'd find y' for him." He grinned then.

"Who's lookin' for you, Jurgen?" asked Vallon levelly. "Who chased you into hidin' behind a long robe and a Bible? And how much are they givin' for you, dead or alive?"

Jurgen grinned. "It don't matter, now. Not to you, it don't, Vallon."

The muscles in Vallon's calves tightened. Jurgen would kill him in a moment, anyway. He might as well risk jumping the man—it was no more difficult to die moving than standing still. If only there could be some distraction, something to give him a jackrabbit's chance when he leaped.

Vallon didn't consciously pray. But it must have been something, and it must have been heard somewhere. Because suddenly there was the sound of a single gunshot, and then, immediately a volley of them. Jurgen turned his head and then Vallon was in mid-air.

It was odd, Vallon thought. He had *known* there would be this chance. The instinct he shared with the plainsman, the Indian fighter, the desert rat, the foot soldier, had told him. And knowing it he could fight objectively; each blow and parry, each grip and break became not a personal thing on which his life probably depended, but a detached problem to be solved in the instant. It was almost as though he were standing aside and watching someone else fight for his life.

It was only through a thick fog in his ears that he heard the continuing gun-shots from the settlement. His senses were more attuned to what was happening within inches of him. Jurgen, for instance, was swearing.

Vallon had the redbeard in a fierce clutch with his right hand, his left had closed down upon the other's gun and he had deliberately slammed the crotch of his thumb and forefinger in front of the hammer to keep it from striking the cartridge. He felt the thing bite with hot pain into his skin as Jurgen pulled the trigger. And then the two of them thudded ungracefully to the ground. Vallon, with the red beard for a handle, began to pestle the ground with Jurgen's head.

He lost count after a while. It seemed there might be no end to gripping, breaking, clutching, clawing. Jurgen fought with his fingers, the heel of his hand, his knuckles, his forehead, his teeth, his knees and his feet. And so did Vallon.

Blood began to show on both men, the dust grimed into it and mottled them with splotches. But there was no continual pain, just the sharp, initial burn and then confused, swirling numbness.

Then, suddenly, inexplicably for the moment, Jurgen was limp in his hands.

He thought he heard the sound of horse's

hoofs behind him. He was too tired to turn and look.

"Mr. Vallon—Mr. Vallon!"

That was Nin'ya's voice. He nodded, swayed to his knees and then to his feet. It was hard to stay on them. He sensed, rather than saw, two horses come beside him. Nin'ya dismounted from one, ran the few steps to him and held him steady by the arms. "You're hurt," she said. Her breath was quick, Vallon could feel it warm on his neck.

He shook his head. "I'm all right."

She stared at Jurgen. "Is he—"

"I reckon so," said Vallon. "Hit his head on a rock."

Then she straightened suddenly. "We've got to go, quickly," she said. "Durante and his men have taken Shalam. They've killed many men—"

"Newbrough?" Vallon turned his head toward her.

She nodded. It was a short, automatic nod but there was more sorrow in it than there would have been in hysterics. "I saw them come as I ran from here. Saw them shoot and saw Newbrough and the others drop. I didn't go into the village, I took these horses from the corral. They never noticed me—"

THEY mounted the horses and Vallon brushed a black spear of hair from his eyes. "I've got to get to Albuquerque," he said, "there's a coupla witnesses there and one o' them high priced lawyers can probably clear me on this thing. But what are you goin' to do, Nin'ya?"

She turned a white face to him. "May I not go wherever you go?"

"Nin'ya," he said, "what are you goin' to do out—out there?" He indicated the world in general with a sweep of his arm. "You don't know what people are like, or how to get along, or—"

"You will teach me," she said.

He stared at her. "You mean—you want to, well, go with me like you was supposed to go with Jurgen. Be my wife?"

She nodded. "Perhaps we can come back here some day and continue what Shepherd Newbrough began. I think not in his way, for the Shepherd could not fight for these things. There must be those like Newbrough, I suppose, but there must also be those young and strong to defend those like Newbrough. You will teach me how to live in the world and it is in the world itself that we will fight for what the Shepherd believed in."

Vallon leaned to one side in the saddle and took the girl's hand, held it tight. "Nin'ya," he said, "It looks like you're the one's gonna teach me a lot o' things."

They touched their horses and rode like that, hand in hand until the sun went out.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 67)

A MIGOS! Here's your chance to learn if you really have a hold of the jerk line when it comes to knowledge of the West and cowboy subjects in general. Below are listed twenty questions—Western brain-twisters. See how many of them you can answer correctly. Call the turn correctly on eighteen or more, and it's plain you're thoroughly alkalied—a genuine old-timer. Answer more than sixteen, and you're still not in the greenhorn bracket. Luck!

1. A "wildcat" is: A special kind of loop made with the lariat? A variety of hitching post? A small wagon used on the cattle trail? An Indian squaw?
2. The term, "waddy," has developed a wide variety of meanings throughout the West. How many of them can you think of?
3. What does a cowboy from the Southwest refer to when he speaks of "Mexican liniment?"
4. What is the cowpuncher's name for logger?
5. If a Westerner invited you over to look at a "boneyard," you would expect to see: An animal graveyard? A slaughter house? A place where animal by-products are manufactured? An emaciated horse which is seemingly all skin and bones?
6. What is a "bog camp?"
7. If the boss of a logging outfit sent you out to find the "donkey doctor," you would return with: The local veterinarian? A physician? An individual who repairs logging machines? An old, flea-bitten burro?
8. What is a "bull's mansh," and where in the West would you be likely to find one?
9. What is the meaning of "to cack?"
10. In the language of the Westerner, what is "barnyard golf?"
11. If a cowpuncher told you that he was going to "comb" a horse, you would know he was going to: Curry the animal? Run his spurs along its neck in order to make it buck? Brand it with a running iron? Have the animal reshod?
12. What are "hobble stirrups," and how do they differ from ordinary stirrups?
13. When the term is used in reference to cows, what is the meaning of the expression "to juice?"
14. "Grunt" is a slang expression used to indicate the meat of what kind of animal?
15. If an old sourdough miner told you he was going to have "strawberries" for supper, you would know he was planning to make a meal on: Beans? Tamales? Any delicacy? A special kind of beef stew?
16. What is the meaning of the term "heat blanket?"
17. What is a "pitzen slinger?"
18. In the old West what was the meaning of the expression, "pot luck?"
19. True or false? The expression "shoot into" means to convince or influence.
20. What is a "snubbing post," and where in the West would you be most likely to find one?

While Boothill Waits



THE iron bell on top the white school house down in the river willows toned unmusically over the little cowtown of Elder Springs, proclaiming that another day of school was over, and twelve kids ran out and melted into the decrepit town like water on desert sands.

The twelfth one remained in sight the longest, because he lived farthest from the school—Mrs. Edwards' boarding and rooming house—and also because he didn't want to go back to the ugly gray house. He was the smallest of the twelve, also. He wore knee pants, with elastic to hold up the black stockings. He had a striped white shirt with a lot of buttons and closed tightly at his boyish neck, with no tie. He was capless, had carrot-red hair, bright milk-blue eyes and more freckles than a handful of buckshot. He was in the third grade and nine years old.

The kids didn't call him Red or Peewee, as one might have expected, or even Jimmy Daniels which was his correct name, but Stinky, which is the way of kids. And Jimmy Daniels Jr. was proud of the name Stinky—which is also a kid's way.

This was a warm spring afternoon and Stinky knew he wouldn't go back to his pop for two weeks, as school wasn't yet out—and maybe not even then. He'd heard some talk between his pop and Mrs. Edwards. . . .

Jimmy stilled the tremble in his boyish lips. Some said that a man shouldn't put his son in a town all alone and never come and see him. They said that his pop hated his red hair because it reminded him of the Trubells, and all that sort of thing. Jimmy knew this wasn't true. His pop had a liking for him, all right. He didn't exactly show it—but that was again the way between men.

Stinky chanced to lift inquisitive eyes through the high screen of willows and he stopped in surprise. Then his stubby, black-stockinged legs began to move as fast as he

could drive them. Old Joe Boothill who took care of the rocky graveyard on the hill back of Elder Springs was raking away the brush and gravel, making room for a new grave. Somebody had died!

Or was about to die. Excitement seized Jimmy. He'd go up and talk to Joe, find out everything, get all the delicate details which was Joe's way of describing things. He had told Stinky of Bad Will Adams, who'd died skulling out the Last Chance with blazing .45's, of Gorilla Pete who'd had a pegleg, broke it off and clubbed Savage Sam to death—then got hit by it himself. Old Joe had all their graves marked and knew all about them.

He rounded the scabby, blue-painted porch of Mrs. Edwards' house and almost fell trying to stop. His pop sat there on black Queenie, talking to Mrs. Edwards!

Pop! Hi, Pop! The words he wanted to shout didn't come. Why, he didn't know. It was—well, he just never had yelled at his pop like that.

His father was looking down at Mrs. Edwards who had a towel around her bony head and a feather duster in her skinny hands, and his pop, with his flat hat pulled low, making his thin, dark face look even darker, was talking.

"Keep him t'home all the time, understand! To and from school have Miss Forrest walk with him—"

THEN the man saw the boy. Ed Daniels' lips went into that thin line Stinky knew so well. The town and range people said his pop was a range hog; that he was out of hand since Jimmy's mother died. They said he was stingy, that he hadn't even gotten a doctor when Stinky came, that he was too busy at round-up time fooling with his cattle to save his wife's life, that he didn't give a continental, anyway, because she was

By THEODORE J. ROEMER

LIQUORS



||

Boothill Joe was never tired of digging graves—and Jimmy was pretty sure his old man could keep fillin' them. He was too young to know that that most men fill a grave—just once!

His third shot sent Trubell back and down...

a Trubell and old Trubell had run him off the big spread. They said a lot of things.

But Stinky knew all these weren't true. None of them were. He hadn't even heard all the things they said, but those he had, he knew weren't so. His pop was the greatest and best man in the world. He could do anything!

Now he said, "Hello—father," as Miss Forrest had coached him.

"Hello, James," his pop said bruskiy. Ed Daniels glanced once more meaningly at Mrs. Edwards, then back at his only son. "Tonight you play in the yard here; don't go rammin' all over town, hear? You stay in the yard every night until Mrs. Edwards says you can do otherwise."

A horsefly took the great black mare on the neck at that instant and the animal reared. Ed Daniels jerked her down and clubbed her savagely between the ears with closed fist, pulling her away from the boy who hadn't moved, while Mrs. Edwards shrank back in startlement.

The man's black, thin eyes gleamed down at his son at that. Then he said, "Mind what I said, now!" sharply.

"Yes, father."

His pop wheeled Queenie with a hard rein. At the street he turned the horse and gugged stiffly up the wide, still thoroughfare of Elder Springs' main drag, his black eyes taking in each side of the street, every movement of man or dog or horse, but not turning his black-hatted head an inch.

Stinky watched him with pride.

Then he remembered his father's queer orders.

"Why doesn't he want me to leave the yard?"

"No prattling now. Get in there for your milk and bread." Mrs. Edwards shuttled him up the sagging steps with the feather duster.

Stinky ate his sugared bread and drank his milk in the silence of the long green-painted kitchen and when he was about finished he heard Miss Millie Forrest, the teacher, come into the yard and talk to Mrs. Edwards. Mrs. Edwards' words came faintly.

"... trouble ... foreclosed. ... Paunch Trubell is in town drinking. ..."

Stinky couldn't get all of it but he heard Miss Millie say something hotly, then come into the kitchen. And there was something troubled and shadowy in her eyes. Her eyes always reminded Stinky of his pony's eyes out on the Box D; they were soft and brown and easily hurt.

Miss Millie now came over and put her hand on his carrotty head and didn't say a word, and when Stinky asked her why he couldn't go out of the yard she left the room

quickly and he was sure she was saying under her breath something about "... fighting beasts. ..."

Stinky frowned, then remembered old Joe's work on boothill and he ducked up the wooden stairs to his room and in a jiffy had pulled on his cut-down levis which Miss Millie had sewed for him. He tugged on the boots Tex had brought from Laramie—Tex was the best rider and shooter on the Bar D, outside of his pop—then pulling on his wrinkled hat, opened the window and slid down the rain pipe.

He hadn't taken a dozen steps through the river willows when a dog whined in the barn.

"Doggone," he said. He crawled back through the woven wire fence, untied the brown and white pup, then looked at the new clothes line with which Mrs. Edwards had tied the dog to keep it from following him to school. Rick hadn't learned to gnaw through it yet.

"This will make a swell lariat," he told the pup jubilantly and led the way to the river.

But where the trail turned up the rock slope toward old Joe's shack, Stinky stopped. A hard, flat sound came to his ears. It came at steady intervals, sometimes two bursts, sometimes three but most of the time only once. And wrinkling his freckled nose in puzzlement, Stinky said, "Let's see, Rick."

As he crossed a hummock of sand and great flat rocks between which scraggly oak were trying to grow he gradually placed the sound. It came from the "city dump," a wide refuse of tin cans which was the accumulation of many generations of Elder Springs.

STINKY crept to the edge of the oak and saw a great, thick-shouldered, big-bellied man in ragged vest, boots and shapeless hat standing on the river edge. And he was doing a peculiar thing. He had a pile of cans at his feet. He'd take one, throw it into the river, then jerk the gun from the holster at his hip and fire at it. He'd blaze until it was hit and had sunk from sight.

Stinky's eyes widened. Most of the time he hit the cans with the first shot, and even to Stinky's experienced eyes that was shooting. The cans were small milk cans.

Stinky didn't know whether to yell out a greeting or steal back into the oak—the man's face was red and puffed up and looked a little ugly—and then the man stopped shooting, felt of his gun barrel, jerked his hand away and put it back into the holster. He sat down on a rock, took from a paper sack a half-emptied bottle of whiskey and threw back his head.

As he drank the shapeless hat fell off. Stinky stared. The man had the same color hair he had!

Stinky went forward. "Hey."

The man jerked about as if rammed with a gun. He grabbed the shiny gun butt sticking well above the black holster; then his splayed fingers slowly relaxed.

His eyes widened at the sight of Stinky's hair, just as Stinky's had at the color of his. He said gruffly, "Who are you, bub?"

"Me? I'm Stinky."

The man sat bucking wetly on the hot rock, his fingers on the whiskey bottle, his eyes speculatively on the boy. Stinky wrinkled his stub nose, independent.

"You got the same color eyes as me, too. Who are you?"

"Me? I'm—" The man spat. He wiped fat fingers over his paunchy jowls. There was something struggling in his eyes. Anger. He knew the kid before him. He knew he was his sister's boy. And he knew the lad was the son of the man who had foreclosed on the big Tilting T—or what was left of it.

The lights in his red-rimmed milky eyes roiled deeply. They stared steadily at the boy in the scuffed boots and blue levis with the clothesline in his hand. Anger and hate, grudges from years back rolled into them and made them ugly and he kept staring at the boy, his lips working silently.

Stinky saw it. "What's the matter? Are you sick? Sometimes I get that way after eating sour oatmeal. Mrs. Edwards gives me castor oil, but Miss Millie gives me a pill and puts me in bed. I'll get you one of them pills. Miss Millie is home."

The man didn't answer. He lurched to his feet. He took hold of Stinky's collar. "Did you ever hear the name of Trubell?" he asked harshly.

Stinky nodded. "Sure. That's my grand-pop's ranch. Tex told me all about it. Biggest in the state—outside of my pop's."

"Outside of your pop's." He said it snarlingly, and with a savage kick, sent the remainder of the can pile flying into the river. He scooped out his gun and blazed six times. Five cans disappeared.

"There! Think your pop can do that?"

Stinky blinked. "I reckon. My pop's the greatest man—hey!" Terror suddenly was in his voice. "Rick! Come here!"

The ungainly pup, with some throwback to retrieving ancestry, had leaped into the river after a brightly spinning can, but he hadn't taken a dozen strokes with his puppy paws when the current took hold of him. Rick was going down, rolling over and over.

"Rick! Rick!" Stinky ran along the edge of the water.

For a second the paunchy man stood there listening to the boy crying to his dog and watching the dog trying to come back and the river sucking him out and down, and then

the big man moved. He ran to the boy, snatched the clothesline and in a twinkling had fashioned a noose. He ran a dozen yards farther down the river to an out-jutting log, poised his huge bulk precariously for a moment, then as the dog came past, made his try.

Luck was with him. At the same instant the dog lifted his head—enough for the line to close back of his ears—and Paunch Trubell dragged Rick, half-senseless, to shore.

He was breathing heavily, himself. He looked down at the red-headed boy sobbing over the dripping bit of fur, then walked quickly back and took up his bottle.

He muttered, "Go 'way, kid. Go 'way."

STINKY didn't tell Mrs. Edwards about the accident, not even Miss Millie, and therefore he didn't tell about the big man with the gun and the red hair, but that evening as he lay in his low-eaved bedroom, he heard Miss Millie and Mrs. Edwards in the garden below. Mrs. Edwards' voice came first, tartly.

"He was no business man, nothing like his father. He deserved to lose it. Mr. Daniels is perfectly in the right in foreclosing."

"But the method, Annie! The aims and thoughts behind his actions! Besides, Paunch Trubell had an offer from Gus Starr of five thousand over and above the mortgage, and Ed Daniels simply suggested Gus withdraw his offer and he did. Everybody's afraid of Daniels. He's taking it by force."

"Humph! Every man for himself out here."

"But right is right, even here. They hated him for marrying their only girl, taking her away, but that's no reason why he should try to exterminate the Trubells. This Paunch is the only one left."

Mrs. Edwards' sharp voice came again, defending Ed Daniels.

"Old Trubell ran him off the place, gave him nothing. He scratched and struggled to get going. He swore to be bigger some day than the Trubells. And he is! It was unfortunate his wife gave childbirth prematurely and unexpectedly. He couldn't have gotten there. Lord knows he wanted to, even though people say different."

Miss Millie's voice suddenly was soft. "Is that true? Do you really think he loved his wife?"

"Loved her?" Mrs. Edwards exclaimed. "He was mad about her! He had to be to brave that nest of Trubells and Old Grant, her father! I tell you, Millie, all the justice isn't on the side of Trubell's fence. Ed Daniels has had a hard, bitter furrow to plough."

"But if he loved her so much, why doesn't

he love the boy? Is it as they say, because he has the Trubell red hair? She was a pretty blond girl according to the talk."

"I don't know why he does act his way toward the boy. All I know is he pays me well for taking care of him, and I am going to do it."

They moved farther up the garden and Stinky, already puzzled, his thoughts whirling, could hear no more. What did they mean? What did foreclosure mean? Who was pretty? The words jumbled over and over in his mind and he fell asleep, thinking sure he'd see Joe Boothill tomorrow and learn all about everything—even for whom that new grave was being made. But also in his excitement, there was something in this that made him afraid.

Miss Millie walked to school with him next morning and back at noon. It seemed silly to Stinky. When they went back after dinner some parasoled women saw them and said hello to Miss Millie and when they were past the women looked around and began talking. Other people looked at Stinky.

He asked, "What's the matter with everybody today, Miss Millie?"

"Hush up," she said and seemed to swallow quickly. Stinky said no more.

Tex came riding past Mrs. Edwards' as Stinky walked home with Miss Millie and Stinky gave a whoop, but all the gaunt foreman did was jerk in his saddle and give him a bony, preoccupied smile and gallop on up to the sheriff's office. Tex's face was worried.

"What's he going to Sheriff Smith's office for?" Stinky inquired.

"To try to stop some bad men from fighting," she said quietly. "Now get in there for your bread and milk."

Stinky had never seen Miss Millie so close to tears. He remembered when his pop had come in once last month, his pop had stood out on the porch in the dark with Miss Millie, and Stinky had since wondered if Miss Millie liked his pop. She'd be swell to have out on the Box D; she could make the swellest cookies. But now, the grip of her fingers on his hand as she sent him into the kitchen, awakened the little fears he had known last night before he fell asleep. He didn't like his bread and milk that afternoon. He had to see Joe Boothill and right away. He hurried to his room.

As he came to the turn in the trail where he'd heard the red-headed man shooting yesterday he stopped. He didn't hear the man shooting now. A stillness hung over the river, over the hill above him. It seemed to hang all over Elder Springs at his back.

He turned up the trail to Joe's shack, his stout little legs digging in the loose shale.

When he got to the shack he found the

door open and a hot skillet on the table, as if recently removed from the stove, but old Joe wasn't around. He went to the door and called, then walked between the gravestones, looking. Joe sometimes was a little deaf.

But he couldn't find Joe and he retraced his steps slowly back down the shale slope and he felt strangely lonesome, suddenly. He went back to the porch and Rick came to him and crawled in his arms. The sun was westering. It looked like a melting blob of butter in a bowl of tomato soup. It was hot and still, and the willows by the river hung motionless. The town seemed extra quiet.

HE COULDN'T see the main street from his seat on the porch steps but he saw men walking past toward town. They were sort of quiet, not talking much, he thought, as men usually do, going up for the evening to the Last Chance or to play cards at Tim's. And some looked at him funny-like, as those ladies had that afternoon. He wondered then where Miss Millie and Mrs. Edwards were.

He went into the house but no one was there. He ate another piece of bread and went out on the porch again. He wished his pop would come. Or Tex. And take him out to the ranch. He wished his pop would come on black Queenie and let him ride back-saddle. That would be fun.

He put his head against the porch post and watched the sun throwing long shadows over Joe's graveyard up on the shale hill and he wished his pop would come and say, "Well, Stinky, we need a man out there from now on and you're the man. There's some ropin' to do—" but his pop never called him Stinky. It was always James. Why? If it'd only be Jimmy, it wouldn't be so bad. . . .

He wondered where the red-headed man of yesterday had gone to. Maybe he was up-town, staying at the hotel. Stinky liked him, even though he had a fat belly and drank whiskey. The man had pulled Rick from the river. And he knew the man had liked him.

Then he heard Grandpa Daley bringing his milch cow down from the river hill, the cowbell rattling lonesome-like, and Stinky knew then it was well past suppertime. He wondered where Mrs. Edwards and Millie were. He stood up.

Rick spraddled to his legs also. Stinky said, "You stay here, Rick. I'll go find out where they are." He went around the house and up the street, Rick at his heels.

He went past Mrs. Daley's house and decided they weren't in there. He went past the bootshop and the high pickets of the lumber yard and spotted Mrs. Walter's Ready-To-Wear Shop and decided they'd be there. He hurried his steps.

There were a lot of rigs in town and the racks before the Last Chance and Tim's were filled with saddle horses, he saw, but he didn't see many people on the street. That was funny.

The sun was low now. Buildings flung shadows far, even the spokes of a wheel walked up a building wall. Stinky looked at the horses standing hipshot at the racks and wondered which one he'd like. Then he stopped, eyes widening with joy.

Black Queenie stood before Tim's. And next to it stood Tex's bay gelding. Stinky remained rooted to the thick planks. His pop had come into town tonight! And Tex with him!

He stepped off the plank walk between two rigs and hurried to cross the street toward Tim's when a long shadow moved up the line of vehicles toward him. He looked swiftly across and saw the red-headed man he'd met yesterday come from around the Last Chance.

Stinky opened his mouth to shout but at the same moment a group of men appeared around the saloon also and filtered into doorways and niches between buildings, and the big man continued walking slowly up the middle of the dusty street alone. Stinky heard Grandpa Daley's cow bell tinkling again and knew it was exactly eight o'clock, because that was when Grandpa Daley always got finished.

He watched the big man and wondered why he walked so funny, as if he were on eggs and didn't want to break any. And there was something funny about his face also. It wasn't red and flushed as yesterday, but kinda

white and ashy, and the blue eyes were small as pencil erasers squeezed flat.

He heard a man say, "Paunch is chain lightnin'. Ed hasn't got a chance."

Another answered. "He won't back down now. Not before a Trubell. He'll come out." It was a flat statement and everybody heard it.

Then silence.

Stinky wet his lips. He couldn't understand all this. He saw the red-headed man was wearing his black, polished gun, and his hand was stiff at his gunbelt, the other swinging heavily, flapping his black vest some on that side. The man was staring up the street at the door of Tim's deadfall.

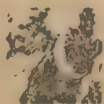
Stinky swung his eyes across and they widened. The wings of the saloon opened and his pop stood there. His pop looked up and down the street, saw the man coming, and stepped down the wooden steps, across the planking and into the dust. And he began walking toward the red-headed man, kinda funny too.

Stinky wrinkled his forehead and bit his underlip. He saw Tex and a bunch of men come out of Tim's behind his pop and flatten against the building, watching. He saw Sheriff Smith among them.

He heard Tex cry, tight-voiced, "For God's sakes, Bradley, stop them damn fools."

"You try an' stop 'em. I talked to 'em both."

Stinky watched his pop and the red-headed man walk toward each other. They weren't very far apart now. He saw his pop had his flat, black hat pulled low over his dark face and he had his coat off and his white shirt sleeves were pulled up extra high by his arm bands. And then Stinky saw his pop had a



TWO GREAT NOVELS

BEFORE THE DAWN

by John Taine



Blindly they lived, savagely they died, the monstrous outcasts of a half made world—until the day when they waged their last titanic battle for survival, long before the dawn of Eden. . . .

—and—

THE HOUSE OF THE SECRET—by Claude Farrère

A House of the Lost . . . a fearsome tryst in the night . . . a man who dared to face a nameless peril that was neither of the living nor the dead. . . .

Important Announcement!

Beginning with the February issue FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES will appear on the newsstands once every month! The February issue will be on sale January 9th at all stands!

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gun. And he stared for five unmoving seconds at the gun, then the meaning came to him. His pop never wore his gun unless he meant to kill something—a floundered cow, or a horse that had broken his leg—and Stinky, in one wild instant, looked at the big red-headed man who had saved Rick.

He didn't cry out. He just ran forward.

Then he said, "Pop! Don't kill him! Pop, don't!"

Ed Daniels' black eyes flickered toward the approaching running figure, then held steady on the slow-walking Paunch Trubell. Paunch Trubell's slitted eyes didn't shift; they were fastened on Ed Daniels' right hand.

They were close now, fifteen paces apart. Stinky yelled once more, "Don't shoot him, pop," and flung himself into his father.

The jar jerked Ed Daniels' right hand. And in a flash Paunch Trubell scooped for his gun.

The fat splayed fingers came up with iron in their clutch. It was like the movement of light and Ed Daniels, seeing Paunch Trubell was going through with his draw, went for his own weapon, but he was a full second slow now. He realized it and tried for swiftness squeezing the trigger barely before the barrel cleared leather.

His first bullet went into the dust, kicking dirt halfway between the two men. His second went high. In desperation he jerked up his gun, squinting, and threw his third shot, and at that, Paunch Trubell went back and swayed spraddle-legged. Then slowly his tree-thick legs bent down. He dropped slowly to his knees.

Ed Daniels lowered his gun. He stared. Paunch Trubell still had his Colt up and on him, and Daniels was dimly conscious the man had the bead on him all the time while he was wildly blazing away, but he hadn't shot!

Daniels looked down. He saw the sobbing boy clinging to his shirt front. He heard his son saying, "He—he saved Rick from drowning in the river yesterday. He liked me, pop, and I liked him—"

Then Ed Daniels understood why Paunch Trubell had held his fire.

Daniels looked across the couple dozen feet of dust and shadow. Paunch Trubell was lying in the dust, his great ragged arms flung outward, his face down. Ed Daniels looked down at the smoking gun in his hand, then lifted it and flung it across the street where it skidded under a rig, scaring the horses; then he walked toward Paunch Trubell.

He turned him over. Men ran forward. Somebody yelled for room for the doctor. But Stinky didn't see anything of this. He felt his pop's hard arm around him and it was shaking. He looked up, scared, into his pop's

thin, smooth face. He saw the years of suffering and bitterness flow across it and back again, and then his pop stood up and took him up into his arms. His pop walked slowly down the street toward Mrs. Edwards' boarding and rooming house. He was breathing hard.

THE blue dusk had turned to blackness and stars glinted in the river below Stinky's room. He sat by the open window, chin in hands and it was funny, he thought, how nice it was to go to bed tonight. His pop had sat by the long table and watched him eat every mouthful. Mrs. Edwards had given him whipped cream and canned peaches for dessert. Miss Millie had said he didn't have to learn any lessons that night. But what he had liked best was his pop sitting there with a new little curl to his lips.

Tex had come in and said Paunch, his uncle, wasn't going to die. The bullet had slanted upward, away from the heart. And Stinky was glad for that, and he saw his pop was, too, for he said slowly to Tex, "Go up an' tell him if he needs help roundin' up stock or fixin' fences, we'll send the boys over." He waved Tex out. And Stinky saw Tex was grinning.

Millie was smiling softly.

Stinky looked down the rain pipe and wondered how he'd get to slide down and go up and see old Joe. He wanted to find out for whom that new grave was going to be dug.

But voices beneath on the porch stayed him. He listened and he recognized his pop's, and then Miss Millie's.

Miss Millie was saying, "Why didn't you come in oftener and see Jimmy? I could never understand—"

"Because I couldn't. I was afraid to get closer to him! Can't you understand? I was afraid to open old memories. I thought if I stayed away, remained hard to him, to the world, to everybody—"

"You were foolish. It would have helped, not hurt."

"I know that now."

There was a silence. When Stinky could stand it no longer he thrust his carrot head out the window and spoke down at their shadow on the porch settee.

"Pop, can Miss Millie go out to the ranch with us and make cookies?"

The shadow parted, made two. And his called him Jimmy. He closed the window softly.

and go to bed, Jimmy." It sounded gruff.

Stinky scowled, then grinned. His dad had called him Jimmy. He closed the window softly.

Maybe tomorrow he'd go up and see about that new grave.

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 59)



1. A "wildcat" is a special kind of loop which the cowpuncher makes with his lariat.

2. Originally it is probable that "waddy" referred to an especially efficient cowpuncher. The term developed other meanings, however. Cattle rustlers use it to indicate a person who was, to them, trustworthy or dependable. Nowadays, too, waddy is used to designate any hired hand about the ranch.

3. When a Southwesterner refers to "Mexican liniment," he is speaking of oil.

4. In the language of the cowpuncher, the logger is often called a "timberwolf."

5. You would expect to see an emaciated horse.

6. A bog camp is a camp which has been located close to a water hole. Thus, a damp, dank camp would be known as a bog camp.

7. If the boss of a logging outfit sent you out for the donkey doctor, you would, as an old-timer, return with a mechanic who fixes logging machines.

8. A "bull's mansh" is the ranch boss' house, and you would, of course, be likely to find one on any large, prosperous ranch. The term sometimes refers to the foreman's house.

9. To "cack" means to throw cactus on an animal in an effort to make him fight or pitch.

10. "Barnyard golf" is the game of pitching horseshoes.

11. To "comb" a horse means running spurs along its neck to make it buck.

12. "Hobble stirrups," unlike ordinary stirrups, are either tied together under the horse's belly, or are tied to the saddle girth.

13. The true Western cowboy (although he seldom performed the operation) would not say he was going to "milk" a cow. Rather, he would "juice" the animal.

14. "Grunt" is a Western slang expression used for pork or pigs in general.

15. If an old sourdough miner told you he was going to have "strawberries" for supper, you could rest assured he was planning to dine on beans.

16. A "heat blanket" is a pocket of dead, super-heated air. Needless to mention, these heat pockets were not popular with the cowpunchers who were forced to carry on their ranch and range duties regardless of climactic freaks.

17. A "pitzen slinger" is a hunting gun.

18. Unlike its present day meaning, in the Old West "pot luck" referred to food actually brought or contributed by a guest.

19. True. "Shoot into" means to convince or influence.

20. A snubbing post is a post generally found in the corral and used to aid in subduing a rebellious animal.

Three men went down in the first volley from the impregnable coach. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Ready for a Hell-Ride

BRAXTON COLE, owner of the Great Western stage line, climbed down from the railed roof of the new Concord, tossed a hammer into the tool box and then walked toward a pail of water to clean up. His two workmen were still banging away at the interior of the coach. Upholstery, leather seats and beautifully painted poplar panels had been torn from the coach and scattered about the interior of the shed.

Wiping his big hands with a rag, Braxton

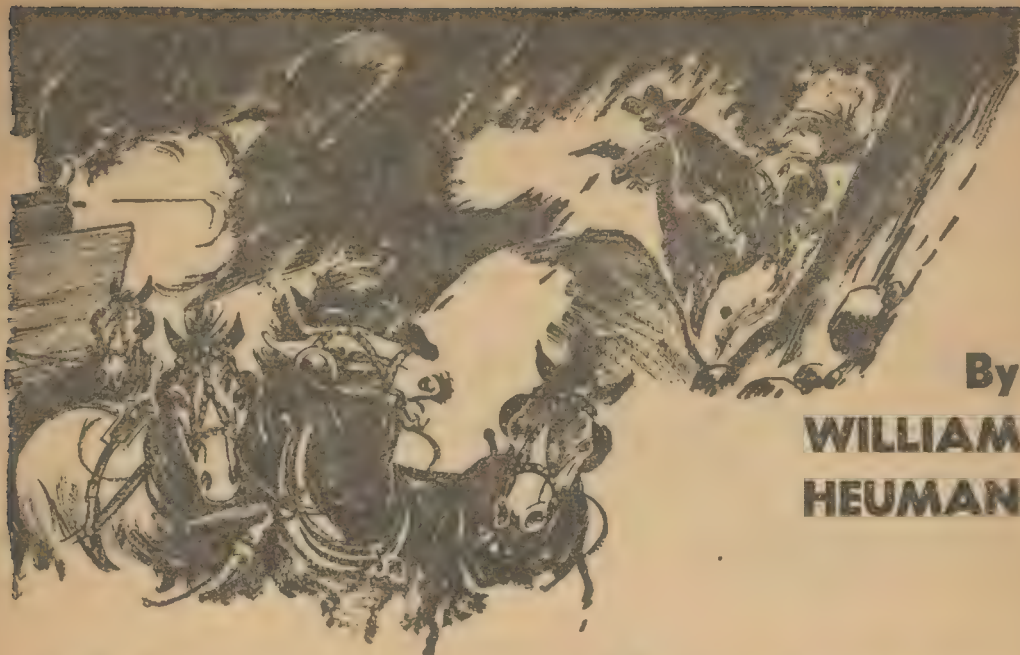
A badman gen'rally makes out all right—till he meets a bad enough good man!

surveyed the coach standing beyond this wreckage with satisfaction. Steel sheets now lined her interior. In place of the roll-down shades over the windows, he'd inserted steel panels with loopholes for shotguns. The treasure chest, usually bolted to the floor beneath the driver's feet, up front, was now part of the interior. It was of steel, bolted where the rear seat had been. Two huge padlocks held down the steel lid, and Braxton Cole knew those padlocks would resist even shots from a .45 Colt.

One of the workmen stepped down through the door and grinned at Braxton, his face dirty, blue eyes shining through the grime.

"Finish 'er up in the mornin', Mr. Cole," he chuckled. "She'll be a jimdandy rollin' safe."

"She'll roll on the road in three days," Braxton said quietly. He tossed away the rag and picked up his claw-hammer coat. A black, flat-crowned hat hung on a peg nearby, and he picked this up as he walked toward the door, a tall man, the long, black coat giving a false impression of leanness. His



By
**WILLIAM
HEUMAN**

DEATH RIDES THIS SADDLE

square-set shoulders filled out the claw-hammer perfectly. He walked with a springy stride, the black hat pulled down over slate-colored eyes.

There was a sliding bolt on the shed door, and he was opening it when someone started to bang on the outside. The late afternoon sun streamed through the high shed windows, higher than a man's head, preventing anyone from looking inside.

A flicker of annoyance crossed Braxton's lean face as he pulled open the door. He'd given strict orders in the yard that no one was to enter the No. 4 shed.

Ned Carver, his paymaster, a small, gray-haired man with a green eyeshade strapped to his forehead, stepped inside and mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"Damn, Braxton," he growled, "she's givin' me hell in the office." He walked toward the coach then and looked inside, shaking his head in admiration.

"Who?" Braxton asked him.

Carver had been with Great Western since ten years ago, when John Cole, Braxton's father, had opened the line in 1863, during the war.

"Reckon your dad would o' liked this," Carver chuckled. "Hell of a slick—" He stopped and then said, "Woman's complainin' about the trip over the pass, Braxton. Must o' got shaken up a little, an' she wants to see the man owns this infernal line."

Braxton frowned and took a deep breath. He'd run up against squawking females before—women who had come from Frisco to see Crystal City and the silver mines. They didn't know what a run over the pass meant—they expected as smooth a ride as they got through San Francisco's paved streets.

"Couldn't you talk to her, Ned?" Braxton scowled.

The paymaster shook his head emphatically. "This one wants to see the head man," he

stated, still examining the steel-lined coach with interest. He added, "She come in on Les Bannister's run."

Braxton Cole grinned a little. "If she'd ridden with Slade," he murmured, "she probably wouldn't be able to talk."

The paymaster came over to the door, scratching his head, his eyes still studying the reconverted Concord coach.

"Anybody breaks into her," he laughed, "will need more'n a bottle opener, Braxton."

Braxton nodded grimly.

FOR the past month not a mine operator in Crystal City would risk sending bullion or payrolls over the Great Western stage line. Six coaches had been held up in three weeks and strongboxes emptied. Insurance companies in San Francisco refused utterly to underwrite shipments of silver over Great Western. Because of the danger of hold-ups, passenger service had dropped considerably and, Braxton Cole knew, would continue to drop unless he could guarantee safe trips to the coast.

In the Great Western yards lay eighteen serviceable Concorde which had been taken from the roads because of this reduced traffic. Not only on the Frisco run over the pass, but other trips to Irontown, to Springvale, and Metropolis, had been harried by the unceasing work of road agents.

"It ain't one band," Ned Carver had said several times. "There's been too damned many raids on Great Western coaches, Braxton, an' these boys are all over at the same time!"

For weeks Braxton had been pondering over this fact. He'd taken over Great Western three years before after John Cole had passed away and he'd tried to build up the line. His father had used Crystal City as the hub for his stage runs, and he'd had nearly one hundred coaches on the road when he'd passed on. Braxton had increased the hundred by another fifty, with Crystal City still booming as the silver center, and millions of dollars worth of bullion going over the pass each month to San Francisco.

"In another year," Ned Carver had stated confidently, "you'll be as big as Wells-Fargo, Braxton."

Braxton had had plans for the line. He had contemplated expanding to the southwest, to the ranching districts, and up into the northwest, where plenty of farmers were settling down. The populace demanded transportation—fast transportation—and Braxton had been buying up bigger, more powerful stock to pull his Concorde; he'd shortened the distance between swing stations from twelve miles to ten so that his drivers could put on more pressure in the interest of greater speed.

Until the road agents had begun to cut in on his passenger trade, he'd been corresponding with the big Abbott-Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire, makers of the finest coaches in the world. He'd asked for bigger, more spacious coaches, with better spring devices. Already, Great Western had the reputation of furnishing the most comfortable runs of any stage lines in the country, with the exception of the tough pass sector. Braxton Cole still sought for more comfort, more conveniences on the road.

Walking across the Great Western yards now toward the office, Braxton watched one of his coaches swing around a corner up the street, two wheels off the ground, and then drive for the yards at a terrific rate of speed, scattering street traffic right and left.

A yelping, yellow dog nearly went under the wheels, but the driver, wielding his whip gleefully, kept the six bay horses going at top speed. Braxton recognized the man up on the box as Ben Slade, a comparatively new driver with Great Western, and known on the line as a reckless one.

Slade handled the six lines with amazing skill as the coach catapulted down the narrow street, missing a stalled freight wagon by a matter of inches, and then shooting into the Great Western yards, up the ramp, and in front of the station, without slowing up.

There was a terrific shriek of brake shoes, the rasp and scrape of iron tires, as Slade slammed on the brake and literally pulled the six horses back on their haunches.

Braxton crossed the yard grimly, his jaw clamped tight. Five passengers were stumbling out of the vehicle, holding bruises, scowling up at the driver who had just tossed his lines down to an attendant.

"Reckon that'll be five less passengers for Great Western," Ned Carver said at Braxton's elbow.

"And it'll cost Slade his job," Braxton said tightly. "I've warned him before about this." He got up to the coach just as Ben Slade leaped down, grinning at the stunned, bruised passengers.

Stock tenders started to unlock the traces and lead the teams out. Braxton could see that the animals were sweating profusely, and he'd given standing orders to all Great Western drivers that they were not to bring their stock into the stations in such a condition. Good horseflesh was scarce, and he'd put out plenty money for his stock.

"Left wheeler there," Ned Carver muttered, "looks lame, Braxton."

"Slade," Braxton called sharply.

The red-haired driver spun around, yellowish eyes narrowing. He had scraggly, tobacco-stained mustaches, and a hooked nose like a falcon. Slade was a hulking man with

plenty of weight up in the shoulders, but with a small bulge around his belt line which came from too much beer drinking, and too much sitting on a stage box.

"Want to see me, Cole?" Slade grinned.

"Draw your pay," Braxton told him quietly. "Stay out of Great Western yards."

Slade's eyes widened then. He'd started to take off his scuffed, soft leather gloves, but he stopped now.

"You firin' me?" he asked.

The five passengers, three of them drummers, who had come out of the coach, were enjoying this. One of them chuckled loudly, and Slade spun around on him, slashing at his face with the loose glove.

The drummer, a small, fat man with a red face, yelled as the heavy glove struck him across the mouth.

"That's enough of that, Slade," Braxton said.

The driver, still angered, acted as if he hadn't heard the words. Deliberately, he pushed the smaller man back against the wall of the office, and hit him in the face with a big fist, knocking him to his knees.

Blood was trickling from the dazed drummer's mouth as Braxton stepped forward and grasped Slade by the shoulder, jerking him around.

Slade wrenched himself free and stepped back, grinning a little, rubbing his hands together thoughtfully.

"You want some o' that, Cole?" he asked softly.

"How much you got?"

Braxton went in then, his eyes on Slade's face, but sinking his left fist in the driver's stomach. He felt his knuckles sink into that bulge of flesh, and heard Slade's breath leave his lungs. Before the driver could fall, Braxton smashed him on the jaw with a right, and then another left to the opposite side of the face. Slade collapsed on hands and knees, and lay there, gasping, his face the color of dirty clay.

"Pay him off when he's up, Ned," Braxton said to the paymaster.

HE WALKED into the office then, brushing past a young girl who had come out of the building. He noticed that she wore a blue bonnet, and that her hair was brown. Her hazel eyes were watching him, wide with fear. Her face was pale, and Braxton guessed she'd witnessed the fight from the beginning, and that she wasn't accustomed to frontier fights.

Ned Carver followed Braxton into the office and walked directly toward his desk and the cash box.

Braxton looked around the room, still breathing heavily, annoyance still in his voice.

"Where is that squawking hen?"

Carver was looking at Braxton queerly from the desk, shaking his head slightly, as if trying to warn him.

"Well," Braxton demanded, "where in hell is she? If she has a complaint against Great Western I'll talk to her." He walked to the anteroom, but that also was empty. He heard a light step behind him then, and the girl with the brown hair came into the room. He knew that she'd been standing in the doorway, waiting for him to turn around.

"I'm afraid I'm—" she stopped, staring at him, wide-eyed. Then, "I had not intended to complain about myself, but my father is an invalid and the rough ride over the pass quite upset him."

Braxton opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out. He was as amazed at her precise English as at her phrasing of her complaint. Her voice was well modulated, every word as clear as a bell. She was still slightly pale, but her cheeks were flushed—partly, at least, with anger.

"Now—" Braxton started to say, but she was already leaving, walking with head erect. Braxton caught a glimpse of her white skirt as it swished around the door sill.

"Damn!" Ned Carver grinned, "I never heard anything like that, Braxton. She put you in yore place an' nailed you there proper. Didn't hafta try, either."

Braxton growled, "Why didn't you warn me?"

The old paymaster chuckled. "Warn you ag'in a female? You ain't never been bothered by women before."

"Who is she?"

"Marked on the books," Carver said slowly, "as Miss Phyllis Melville, an' her dad, Henry Melville."

"Melville?" The name had a familiar ring, but Cole knew he'd never met the girl before.

Carver stepped to the door and looked across the street. Then he motioned for Braxton to come over. He was pointing at a billboard pasted on a vacant house across the road. Braxton made out the words:

HENRY MELVILLE and COMPANY

Will Present Shakespeare's

HAMLET

Oriental Theatre, Crystal City

Two Weeks, Beginning August 10th

There were other lurid statements, featuring the Melville Company as one of America's finest Shakespearean troupes. They had presented a repertoire of plays all over the country and in England.

"Shakespeare!" Ned Carver was saying softly. "Reckon old George Blackwell is losin' his grip at the Oriental, Braxton?"

Braxton continued to stare at the billboard. He'd noticed the sign for weeks, but it had never meant anything to him. He seldom frequented the theater because the bawdy farces presented there were primarily intended for the rough miners of Crystal City.

Braxton Cole had a sudden thought, suggested by Carver's remark.

"Big Three after the Oriental?" he asked the paymaster.

Carver scratched his gray hair. "Reckon I heard somethin' along those lines," he said grimly. "Leon Fairfax made Blackwell an offer, but George turned him down. This Melville's Company opens up tonight."

Braxton Cole went back into the office and sat down at his desk. Carver took off the eyeshade and stared at it for a moment.

"Reckon we'll have Jack McCann's toughs up in the front row o' the Oriental tonight, Braxton. They'll bust up that show sure as hell."

Braxton nodded. He'd watched the Big Three during the past year, and he hadn't liked the way they operated. The smooth Leon Fairfax, big Crystal City mine owner, working in conjunction with Ira See, owner of the ornate Palace gambling house, and Jack McCann, self-appointed town badman, had gradually gotten out of hand.

"Fairfax owns damn near fifty percent o' the claims on Silver Mountain," Ned Carver was saying bitterly. "How he got 'em is another matter. The small operators been squeezed until they hollered, an' if they didn't holler McCann's boys worked on 'em some more."

Braxton Cole toyed with a pencil on the desk. He'd seen Fairfax and See take over the two freighting outfits in Crystal City; See had practically forced the former owner of the Palace into selling out after McCann's toughs wrecked the house several times.

Fairfax, by underbidding all competitors, had gradually gotten a firm grip on most of the stamp mills in Crystal City. Now he was after the town's only theatre, having already made his bid to George Blackwell, who had been one of John Cole's best friends.

"Blackwell ain't gonna last long in this town," Carver said, "if Leon Fairfax an' See have their eyes on his place. They'll pay him half what the building's worth, an' ship him to the coast."

Braxton Cole stared out the window, a thin smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

"I'm waiting for Fairfax to make his first bid for Great Western," he said softly.

Carver grimaced. "Forgot to tell you," he muttered. "Les Bannister wants to say a few things to you, Braxton."

"Send him in," Braxton said. He'd had his own suspicions as to the men behind the

movement to wreck Great Western, but Fairfax and See had seemingly taken no interest in the stage line.

Fairfax regularly shipped bullion through the pass to Frisco, but he'd stopped the practice, along with the other operators, when the run became too risky. There were no competing stage lines operating around Crystal City.

BANNISTER, a veteran stage driver, shuffled into the room a few minutes later. Bannister, like Carver, had been with the line from the beginning.

"I brung in that load from Frisco," Bannister said. "Them theater people."

Braxton nodded. He'd known that Bannister had been more than four hours late on the run, and he knew how rough the trip could be. There were always boulders, sliding down from the slopes, and miniature avalanches blocking the winding road. Usually drivers on the pass run carried picks and shovels, and insisted on passengers helping clear the road when it was blocked by debris.

"Never seen such a damned rough run," Bannister went on quietly. "Had to stop every half hour an' clear up."

"I'm not blaming you," Braxton told him. He was thinking of Phyllis Melville and her complaint. There was no doubt that her father had gotten quite a jouncing on the trip.

"It ain't that," the driver said tersely. "Three times I went up above them damned slides because I didn't like the looks of 'em."

"Find anything?" Braxton asked slowly.

"Plenty o' sign," Bannister growled. "Every one o' them slides was started by somebody."

Braxton Cole grimaced. He looked across at Ned Carver.

"If somebody's tryin' to slow down that Frisco run," Bannister went on, "next they'll be heavin' slides down when the stage's goin' past!"

Braxton nodded. "I'll assign a messenger with each coach from now on," he promised, "whether you're carrying bullion or not."

When the driver went out, Ned Carver asked quietly, "What comes next?"

"I'll know after tonight," Braxton told him. "I'm expecting an offer for Great Western."

Carver looked out the window across the big yards. "We can't operate with all them coaches idle. We got too much overhead, Braxton. Horses eat whether they run or not, an' you ain't fired any o' the yard men."

Braxton stared across the room. "We'll put the bullion coach on the road in three days," he said. "I can persuade Tom Blaine to ship his metal through after he sees the coach."

"You figure everybody will foller Blaine?" Carver asked.

"If we can guarantee the safe arrival of bullion shipments," Braxton said, "there's no reason why every operator on the lode shouldn't. The stuff has been piling up in the local bank and they don't like it either. It provides too much temptation for the bad element." After a while he went on thoughtfully, "I intend to put three riflemen inside every treasure coach leaving Crystal City. There's an opening in the roof for the driver to duck inside when the shooting begins. That makes four guns."

"One coach," Carver pointed out, "can't carry all the bullion out o' this damned town, Braxton."

"If we get through to Frisco," Braxton said, "we'll fix up a dozen of them to leave twice a day. They'll carry only bullion. We can increase the rates and they'll be damned glad to pay it."

Carver was nodding in approval. "That'd make up fer the losses, all right. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Handy

HE HAD supper that night in the dining room of the Emperor Hotel, eating with Tom Blaine, owner of the Big Bonanza mine. Blaine was one of the few mine operators who had been able to fight against the machinations of Fairfax and See. Blaine's tunnels had been raided by unknown toughs, his miners beaten in the streets, water had been diverted into his shafts—but through it all he had stuck to his guns, and his miners and hired gun hands had stuck to theirs. The acts of violence had suddenly stopped at his show of fight and he had been permitted to operate in peace.

He sat opposite Braxton Cole, a small, mild-looking, silver-haired man with a ruddy face. His eyes were bright blue and clear,

utterly fearless. He had been a friend of old John Cole, and he listened now to old John's son.

At last he said, "I have forty-five thousand dollars worth of metal ready to leave when you get your damned wagon fixed to carry it."

Braxton grinned at him and they shook hands.

He went into the Palace at eight o'clock that night, a half hour before the curtain went up at the Oriental theater directly across the way. Ira See's gambling hall was jammed, the drinkers wedged two and three deep along the ninety foot bar.

Braxton spotted Ira See squatting at one of the tables like a fat frog, cards set out on the wood before him, solitaire fashion. His huge jowls hung down, hiding what neck he had, and an unlit cigar was, as usual, clamped between his teeth. Braxton watched the cigar jounce up and down as See murmured something to a waiter. See's small black eyes flitted back and forth across the big room, from the bar to the faro tables along the south wall; over to the dozen poker tables scattered across the floor from the bar to the opposite wall.

Braxton nodded to the fat man and, through the haze of tobacco smoke, saw the gigantic Jack McCann looming up behind one of the faro tables. The small-headed, narrow-faced McCann stood six feet five in his boots, with shoulders in proportion. In Crystal City it was understood that McCann could whip any two men at once in a free-for-all brawl.

McCann, lifting his eyes, saw Braxton crossing the floor with interest. He glanced quickly toward the red-carpeted stairway leading to the apartments above the gambling floor. Braxton saw the immaculate Leon Fairfax, wealthiest man in Crystal City, coming down the stairs.

Fairfax sauntered toward See's table—and these were the Big Three. Braxton found a spot at the bar after a while and slipped into

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it, calling for a drink. For five minutes he listened to the varied sounds in the room, the steady hum of voices, and an occasional nervous laugh. A roulette wheel clicked from one of the off-rooms; glasses clinked, and occasionally one of them fell to the floor with a tinkling crash.

A man stepped away from Braxton's left, and another drinker moved into the vacant space.

This newcomer said softly, "Rye."

Braxton came around, a half-emptied beer glass in his hand. He nodded. "Evening, Fairfax."

"Good night," Leon Fairfax observed and added, "For the show's opening."

"You buy the Oriental yet, Leon?" Braxton asked him blandly. He saw Fairfax's answering grin in the cut-glass mirror behind the bar.

"Why?" Fairfax chuckled. "Is it for sale?"

"Must property be for sale in this town before you buy it?"

"That is an unusual question," Fairfax grinned. He looked at the glass of liquor in front of him, and then he said, "How's business, Cole?"

"Bad," Braxton admitted.

"Haven't seen any for sale signs over the Great Western yards," Fairfax observed.

"You never will," Braxton told him. He added thoughtfully, "Don't let that stop you."

He was deliberately goading the other, and Leon Fairfax let this sink in for a few moments. Braxton was not quite sure of the next remark.

"That mean you'd like an offer for the line?" the lean man asked.

Cole looked at his glass steadily, a small gleam in his gray eyes. He'd been waiting for this for two months, and it had come at last. He'd had to drag the thing out of Fairfax, but now the subject had been opened, he could feel his way ahead.

"There's not enough money in Crystal City for Great Western," Braxton said tersely.

"Sentiment?" Fairfax smiled.

"Call it that," Braxton agreed.

Fairfax shrugged off the matter. "Just curiosity," he stated. "We operators want to see our bullion moving through the pass. We don't give a damn who carries it."

"From the raids on my coaches," Braxton Cole observed, "I'd think somebody was interested."

"Honey draws the bears," Fairfax told him.

"And the rats," Braxton said. "I'm setting poison bait for them now." He knew he shouldn't have made the remark, even though it seemed to make no impression on Leon Fairfax.

"All the operators on the lode," Leon Fairfax said, "want to see Great Western coaches going through on schedule. It's to our advantage."

"We intend to get them back on schedule."

BRAXTON saw the crowd thinning out in the gambling house, moving through the doors toward the theatre across the way. Bright lamps lighted the exterior of the Oriental.

"Seeing the show?" Fairfax asked.

Braxton hesitated. He'd had no definite intention of witnessing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but he'd been thinking of Phyllis Melville, wondering what kind of actress she made. Seeing the broad grin on Jack McCann's face, he suddenly made up his mind. McCann no doubt had his orders to wreck the show tonight. He was already assembling his toughs for the job. If they could run the Melville troupe out of town, the Oriental would be another ripe plum falling into Leon Fairfax's lap.

"Believe I'll cross over," Braxton said, "even though Shakespeare's not in my line."

Leon Fairfax was puffing on his Spanish cigarillo as Braxton passed through the crowd and went out into the street. He stood on the porch, breathing in gulps of fresh night air, then crossed the road with the others.

Buying his ticket for the show, he caught a glimpse of George Blackwell, short, rotund, partly bald. Blackwell was sweating profusely, fright showing plainly in his face as he stood near the entrance.

Braxton paused beside him for a moment. He lighted a cigar and said quietly,

"Trouble, George?"

"Hell," Blackwell mumbled. "I'm afraid of that damned McCann."

"One way to handle him," Braxton said.

Blackwell's blue eyes lit up. "How?" he asked quickly.

"Walk right up," Braxton said, "and hit him on the nose." He walked away then, leaving Blackwell staring after him, crest-fallen.

The Oriental was nearly filled when Braxton took his seat near the rear, close to the right wall. The boxes on either side of the stage were already occupied. Waiters rushed back and forth with trays, bottles and liquor glasses.

There was a balcony directly above Braxton's head, and he could hear the miners up there, stamping their feet, whistling and clapping for the curtain to go up. He moved back a few rows when the cigar butts started to drop to the lower floor. A whiskey bottle fell with a crash on an empty seat two rows in front of him, and then he heard Jack McCann's raucous laugh.

Cole got up from his seat and walked to the rear of the theater, taking a position near the stairs leading to the balcony. He didn't exactly know why this occasion above others should call for his interference, but the desire for action had been building up inside him.

An attendant came out on the stage to light the oil foot-lamps. A white object sailed down from the balcony and struck the curtain behind him with a spat. Yellow egg yolk slid down the maroon velvet and the crowd roared gleefully as the attendant hurried into the wings.

Wall bracket lamps were snuffed out on the walls, and the curtain went up a few moments later. The costumes of the players drew howls and catcalls from the audience. Up in the balcony, Braxton heard McCann's toughs yelling so loudly that the play could scarcely be heard.

George Blackwell stepped out on the stage and made a frantic plea for silence. The little man was trembling with anger as he spoke. A half dozen eggs sailed down from the balcony, and one of them struck him on the left shoulder.

Blackwell disappeared and the show went on, the actors putting on a brave pretense. An elderly, gray-haired man paused in the middle of one of his speeches to address the crowd in humorous fashion. This man played the part of the uncle-king and was billed on the program as Henry Melville.

"I have had eggs thrown at me before," Melville smiled coolly, "but never with such poor marksmanship. Try again, gentlemen, and a cigar to the man who knocks this wig off."

The remark drew loud cheers from the crowd, and the egg-throwing stopped for the remainder of the act. Braxton Cole eyed the elderly gentleman with interest. Henry Melville was thin-faced with a high forehead, and a straight Roman nose. Despite the makeup, Braxton could see that the man had a chronic illness. Its wasting effects were visible about the corners of his mouth and in his pained brown eyes.

Phyllis Melville came on stage during the first act, playing the part of Ophelia, Hamlet's sweetheart. As far as Braxton was concerned, she played with much skill, portraying the part of a simple, innocent young lady.

In the second act the eggs started to fly again, but this time many of the miner spectators resented the missiles. Blackwell had sensed the change in the crowd's attitude and Braxton saw him hurrying down the side aisle between acts. For the first time he was smiling.

An egg missed Hamlet's head by inches, and the young man glared up at the balcony, white with anger. Up in the balcony Jack

McCann's toughs were howling gleefully. When Phyllis Melville, standing at one end of the stage, waiting for her father to finish, was nearly struck in the face with an egg, Cole started up the stairs, two at a time, feeling under his coat for the butt of his Smith & Wesson.

From the rear of the balcony he could see McCann standing up, with a half dozen men around him. Braxton went down the center aisle in a half dozen long strides, pulling up directly behind Jack McCann. The giant had his back turned, and in the semi-darkness didn't recognize Braxton.

"Give 'em another one," he roared, reaching down for an egg, and then turning to hurl it at the actors on the stage.

Braxton calmly picked up the carton, lifted it over his head, and dropped the entire contents over McCann's head, smashing the box over his shoulders.

Egg yolk, mingled with egg shell rolled down the big man's coat as he stumbled among the chairs. Roaring with rage, he ripped the box off his head and flung it aside.

"Who in hell done that?" he snarled, looking around at the dazed toughs.

Braxton felt for one of the loose chairs on the floor. He had one hand on the back of it as he said quietly:

"You want to see me, Jack?"

McCann lunged for him, wiping egg yolk from his face with one hand.

"Damn you, Cole," he grated. "I'll tear your head off."

Braxton whipped up the chair and crashed it down on McCann's head as the giant plunged in at him. The chair legs gave as they came in contact with McCann's shoulders, but the blow momentarily stopped the big man.

Holding the chair back with both hands, Braxton stepped in very fast, swinging the shattered wood at McCann's shins, catching him fully across both legs.

The giant let out an ear-splitting yell and hopped around, clutching at one shin and then the other. Braxton Cole threw aside the chair-back and went at his man, shooting both fists as fast and as hard as he could throw them.

He hit McCann a dozen times before the big man sagged to his knees, shaking his bloody face dazedly.

ALL over the Oriental the cry had gone up—"Fight—fight!" Lights were being lit along the walls and the play had stopped. Swarms of men were rushing up the stairs to the balcony to witness the fight and bet on the outcome. It was over before they could reach the scene.

Braxton Cole braced his right boot against

McCann's broad chest and pushed, sending the man headlong down the aisle and against the iron railing overlooking the balcony.

Slade yelled suddenly, "Get him!"

Slade was six feet away. Cole reached him before he could move, at the same time whipping the Smith & Wesson from beneath his coat. He cracked the barrel of the gun against Slade's head, knocking him down.

Before the other toughs could make a move, he had the gun trained on them as he stood over Slade.

"I'm raising the ante," he said grimly. "I'm asking to see your hands, full or otherwise."

They looked at him, but made no motion. Jack McCann was groaning from the other end of the aisle.

"Pick him up," Braxton ordered, "and clear out."

He stepped aside as they helped the battered giant toward the rear of the balcony. He saw Leon Fairfax standing up there, looking at McCann, smiling mirthlessly, puffing at the long cigarillo.

George Blackwell bounced up the stairs, breathlessly. He caught Braxton's hand, pumping it several times, and gasping, "I don't want you to get into trouble, Cole, on my account."

"I'm in," Braxton smiled. "Start the show."

He pushed his way past Fairfax and through the mob at the head of the stairs. The lights started to go out again as he took his seat on the main floor. Behind him he smelled the faintly aromatic odor of Fairfax's cigarillo.

As he turned his head, Fairfax said softly, "Never thought I'd see the day when a man did in Jack McCann."

"You saw it," Braxton said. He went on grimly, "With bare hands McCann could break me in two. I don't figure on having empty hands when he's around again. Tell him that."

"You'll live a long time," Fairfax grinned. "I aim to," Braxton told him.

The show lasted for another hour and a half, and Braxton crossed over to the Palace with the rest of the crowd at its conclusion. He half-expected Jack McCann to be waiting for him, and he had his coat open with the Smith & Wesson in easy reach, as he stood at the bar.

Ira See, still squatting at his solitary table, watched him closely, no expression on his fat face. A bartender whispered as he mopped up in front of Braxton.

"McCann's gettin' his face patched at old Doc Walker's."

Ned Carver, Great Western paymaster, came into the saloon a little before midnight,

and looked at Braxton with open disgust.

"So you had it out with him," he growled. "You don't figure it'll stop there?"

"No," Braxton smiled, "this is the beginning."

"Trouble on top o' trouble," Carver muttered in disgust.

"Reckon it's all the same trouble," Braxton told him softly. "I got Fairfax to make an offer tonight for Great Western."

Carver's lips tightened, but there was a hint of admiration in his old eyes. "So you made yourself an opening. Now, you either push your wagons through it, or they throw dirt over you."

Braxton grinned. "First they'll have to make me lay put."

A man tugged at his arm. It was George Blackwell, his face suffused with joy.

"Mr. Melville would like to meet you, Cole. He wants to thank the man who made it possible for his show to go on."

Braxton hesitated. He saw Ned Carver watching him closely.

"How was the girl?" the paymaster wanted to know.

Braxton grinned at him, clapped him on the shoulder, and then followed Blackwell back to the Oriental. They went up a flight of wooden stairs to the dressing room.

Braxton found the Melvilles, father and daughter, in street clothes, waiting for him. Melville had been sitting in an easy chair in the corner. He got up when Braxton came in, and walked forward, hand extended. With the makeup off his face, the lines of illness on his face were more pronounced, but he was smiling, and his grip was fairly strong.

He said almost dryly, "On behalf of my company I want to thank you for your good deed tonight."

"He could have been killed," Blackwell said emphatically. "That McCann's broken more than one man in a rough and tumble battle."

Braxton glanced at Phyllis Melville, and then the father hastened to introduce them.

"We've met," the daughter smiled calmly. "To Mr. Cole I'm a squawking hen."

Braxton reddened, and Henry Melville laughed heartily.

"My daughter is always fighting for me," he chuckled. "That ride did knock me out, Mr. Cole—I have a lung condition. My physician has recommended that I settle down in a mountain city—a place like this." He paused, hesitated. Then, "You have been in Crystal City a long time?"

"My father opened the Great Western Line in eighteen sixty-three."

"What are the prospects for this town," Melville asked shrewdly, "when they hit the bottom of the silver barrel?"

Braxton shrugged. "I've seen mining towns fold up overnight," he admitted, "but I don't think Crystal City will. We're situated at the head of the pass out to the coast. All traffic from this side of the Sierras will have to move through Crystal City—that includes railroads eventually. Even with the lode emptied, Crystal City should continue to grow."

Henry Melville nodded in satisfaction. "I have been of that same opinion." He hesitated again. "I am considering buying a half interest in Mr. Blackwell's theatre. Travelers are good theater-goers, and at a cross-roads town like this we could let them come to us—" he smiled faintly—"I'm hardly in a condition to keep traveling, myself."

Braxton looked at George Blackwell quickly. "Tell him about Leon Fairfax?" he asked.

Blackwell's face clouded, and he nodded. "That's the one fly in the ointment," he frowned.

"If we intend to conduct an honest business in Crystal City," Henry Melville said, "why should anyone try to interfere?"

Braxton shrugged. "Fairfax has been wanting the Oriental for some time. He's powerful, politically—and otherwise."

Henry Melville lighted a cigar. He stared at Braxton shrewdly.

"This Fairfax want your stage line?" he asked suddenly.

Braxton blinked. "He made an offer for it tonight." He knew what was coming and wondered whether an alliance with this Melville would be a help or a hindrance. He went on, "I told him I'll see him in hell."

"We'll do the same," Melville smiled, looking at George Blackwell. "After all, if that's where we're going, we couldn't ask more fitting company."

Cole grinned suddenly. "It could be done," he said.

"Under those circumstances," Henry Melville said carefully, "you might regard me as a citizen of Crystal City, and a member of the 'law and order' party."

"Law and order party," Braxton mused. "We might remember that—to give the folks a laugh, come next election."

But he stuck out his hand and the older man said, "Laughing people are happy, son. And they're good people. I know. I've been entertaining folks for a long time."

HE WENT back to the street then, and found Ned Carver waiting for him outside the Palace.

The old paymaster was tense. "What in hell is the mystery?" Carver wanted to know.

Braxton didn't answer him. A bulky man was filling the doorway of the Palace, flat-crowned sombrero firmly pulled down over his eyes, his shoulders almost touching the two doorsills. Braxton saw the red light of his cigar glowing in the darkness.

"Cole," this man said.

Braxton Cole stepped aside, smiling faintly. "Finally cheat yourself into winning at solitaire, Ira?" he asked softly.

Ira See came out on the porch, his weight making the floor boards creak. He had both hands in his pockets, and his huge stomach protruded a full foot beyond the pockets. He had a strangely mild voice for so huge a man.

"You're running a stage line, Cole. Stay out of the show business."

Braxton Cole's grin broadened. He studied See contemptuously, feet spread apart.

"I might like to see my customers entertained at Silver City. Be good business. You giving orders in this town, now, Ira?"

"This one," See told him. "Remember it."

"Hell with you," Braxton said. "I run my business to suit me—might buy the Oriental myself." He heard Ned Carver gasp at his elbow.

"Buy a pine box with it," See stated. "You'll be throwing your business to me."

He turned then and walked back through the door, and there was nothing funny in his peculiar duck-like waddle.

Carver spluttered. "What in hell—"

Braxton said, "That hole you were talking about—it's getting bigger. It'll be more than six-by-three before they bury me. Might even fit Ira."

"Ira See is no man to joke with," Carver growled. "Better be careful, Braxton."

"This is not my beginning," Braxton said grimly. "Leon Fairfax should have thought twice before he started to tamper with my line. It's too late now, Ned."

Ned Carver took a deep breath as they walked back toward the hotel at which Braxton had his rooms.

"Reckon the fight's on, Braxton," he said slowly, resignedly. "Keep that damned gun handy from now on."

CHAPTER THREE

Young Man in a Hurry

IN THE morning Braxton watched his first Concord leave the Great Western yards, pick up three passengers, and then head westward with Les Bannister and a shotgun messenger up on the box.

He went back to work on the "treasure coach" in the No. 4 shed. The steel-plated shutters were being hinged inside the coach,

ready to flap down over the window openings. Poplar panels were screwed back over the steel plates lining the coach.

Braxton had perfected a braking device which could be worked from the interior of the coach, preventing runaways when all the occupants were holed up inside the Concord. The new brake consisted of a simple lever running through the floor. The lever released two iron rods which shot out through the reinforced spokes of the rear wheels, preventing the wheels from turning.

"It'll tear the damned spokes out," Ned Carver had objected.

"We can't use it," Braxton explained, "while the coach is moving. If we're stopped for a hold-up, the driver can throw in his brake from the seat and then tumble down through the roof opening. We set in the extra brake which prevents the horses from breaking away from a standing position."

At one o'clock in the afternoon, Braxton heard one of his coaches coming through the gate at the other end of the yard. Five minutes later he opened the shed door for Ned Carver.

Carver's face was white. "Come on out, Braxton. Take a look."

The Concord was standing in the yard just inside the gate. A man was slumped on the box, and another man sat on the ground, clutching a bleeding shoulder. Braxton broke into a run.

"Les Bannister got it," Carver panted beside him. "He said he wouldn't take it without a fight."

"Dead?" Braxton grated.

"Shot through the back. They got Dick Lang, the messenger, through the shoulder. They let Dick bring the coach back here."

Braxton climbed up on the seat and took one look into Bannister's dead face. Blood began to pound through his temples. He squatted down beside Lang as Carver ran off for a doctor. The messenger was a small wiry man.

"See them?" Braxton asked him quietly.

"There were six," Lang said weakly. "They opened up on us a half mile south o' Indian Rock in the pass. They got Les right away, before he knowed what hit him, and give me this slug in the shoulder. I never saw 'em till they rode out from behind the boulders. Didn't recognize any of 'em. They give me a message for you. They ain't lettin' any of our stages leave town from now on."

"All right," Braxton said. "We'll fix you up, Dick."

He helped the wounded man into the office and waited there till Carver came back with the doctor. While the physician was cutting away Lang's blood-stained shirt, Braxton stood by the window looking across his yards.

When Carver joined him there, he said slowly, "That's it, Ned. Run over to the *Herald* office, Ned. Tell them we're running one of our coaches through the pass tomorrow. Tell them to publish that. We'll pay for the ad."

Carver gulped. "The treasure coach?" he asked.

"Do as I tell you."

He went out and walked toward the Great Western gates. Yard men were carrying Bannister's body into one of the sheds. Braxton Cole pulled his hat low over his face and headed for the office of Sheriff Ad Wiley. The sheriff's cubby-hole office, a few doors down from the Palace, was closed, the shade drawn over the single window. Ad was conveniently out of town.

He stared at the place grimly, and then walked slowly back past the Palace. Ira See had come out and was standing on the porch, blinking in the strong noon day light as if he were not used to it.

Braxton pulled up at the lower step. He said softly, "Where's Wiley?"

See shrugged. The fat man had an unlit cigar in his mouth and he masticated it thoughtfully.

"Reckon Ad's over in French Flats," he said finally.

Braxton laughed harshly. "Tell him to stay there, Ira," he grated, "until the trouble's over. I don't want him in my way, either."

See took the cigar out of his mouth and studied it, his black eyes half-closed.

"Hear you lost one of your drivers, Cole," he said softly. "Too bad."

Braxton heard a light step behind him as he said, "Better buy into the undertaking business in Crystal City, See. There'll be a boom."

Turning, he saw Phyllis Melville coming up. She'd caught his last words and was watching him closely. Braxton tipped his hat. He nodded to See and he stepped over to the girl's side.

When they were down at the corner she said quietly, "It's going all over town that you're trying to start a war."

"And do you have any suggestions?" Braxton smiled.

"What will it accomplish?" Miss Melville asked. "You'll have the streets running with blood. The innocent will go down with the wicked."

"There're no innocent among those who won't fight lawlessness and murder. Those who do will take their chances."

"Such as my father?"

Braxton flushed. "You heard him speak. But I'll do my best for him."

"Your best to get him killed—if it should advance your cause!"

"This country," Braxton tried to tell her, "is different from the places in which you have lived. We have our own methods—and I've already put your father as much as possible on the sidelines. I told Ira See I might buy the Orpheum."

She flashed him a quick look—one he scarcely understood—then he saw her lips tighten as they walked on. She was quiet until they came to the hotel at which the Melville troupe was staying.

"It seems a pity," she said then, "that because a few men can't settle their difficulties amicably—so many must suffer."

Braxton opened his mouth to explain, but she was already walking up the steps. He watched her grimly as she passed through the door, and then he headed back for the Great Western yards. At eight o'clock that night the treasure coach was finished.

NED CARVER sat on an overturned barrel as Braxton stepped down from the box, face grimy with perspiration and dirt. The two carpenters who had been working with him on the project put away their tools and left. Cole made final arrangements with his paymaster.

"Somebody," Carver growled, "is in for a hell of a surprise. I hope it ain't us."

At six o'clock in the morning Cole rolled out of the Great Western yards with three regular passengers. His presence on the box and the fact that he pulled up outside the offices of Blaine's Big Bonanza mine for a payload of silver, were the only unusual features about his departure. Tom Blaine stood in the doorway and waved as Braxton turned the six horses around, sending them down the main street at a sharp trot.

The Concord whirled down a side street and then across the small wooden bridge over Whistling Creek. Braxton lifted the roof opening slightly when they had gone another mile down the road.

He called back to his passengers, who were swearing at the jolting of the steel-heavy vehicle, "You boys are going on another stage at Yellow Creek. This one's a bit rough!"

"Damn right, mister," one man growled. "If I had to ride this to Frisco I wouldn't have an unbroken bone left in my body."

Braxton grinned and lowered the flap. They pulled into the swing station at Yellow Creek two hours later. Braxton jumped down from the box as the attendant led out fresh horses.

"Breakfast is on the house, gents," he told his battered passengers. "Another coach will be through shortly to pick you up."

When the passengers limped into the log cabin, three men stepped from the door and climbed into the coach. All carried six-guns on their hips.

Braxton said softly, "You'll find shotguns and plenty of ammunition in the rack behind the money box."

George Powell, Great Western guard, laughed deep in his chest. "This beats the barricade we had at Dobe Walls!"

O'Donald and Anderson, the other two messengers, had been with Great Western a number of years, and Braxton knew he could count on them in a fight. They held a hurried conference and fifteen minutes later Braxton sent the coach flying out of the station.

They were moving upgrade now, heading for the Devil's Gate and the entrance to the pass. The road wound up through huge boulders, skirting the base of Cougar Mountain. The sun was shining strongly on the other side of the mountain wall, but here in the shadows it was decidedly cool.

There was a sharp dip near the approach to the Devil's Gate, and then a tortuous curve upward toward the pass. Moving through the Gate, Braxton slid open the roof panel and left it open.

It was high noon when they entered the pass proper, and moved past the peculiar formation that was Indian Rock. A quarter of a mile beyond the Rock he saw the big boulder lying in the center of the road and, to one side, sunlight reflecting on a rifle barrel. The rifleman was barely concealed.

Without hesitation, he snatched at the brake and hauled back, bringing the horses to a halt. He let go of the reins and tumbled back through the roof opening, hearing the snarl of a bullet whipping past his head. Powell and Anderson caught him.

"Throw in that brake," Braxton gasped.

Powell grabbed at the inside brake and yanked at it. The six horses were nervously pulling at the coach, but the emergency brake locked the wheels tightly, preventing them from dragging the coach ahead.

Braxton picked up one of the shotguns and squatted just back of the left window.

"They're wonderin' what in hell happened to you," George Powell chuckled. "Reckon they never saw a man drop through a coach roof before."

"When they start riding up," Braxton ordered, "swing the shutters across the windows and open fire." He saw movement up on the slope, a horseman riding across his line of vision, and then another. A man was calling urgently from the other side of the road, but there was no more firing.

There was the sharp clatter of hoofs on the road, and then Braxton saw three horsemen scramble out from behind the boulders fifty yards up the slope, and come down the incline, firing six-guns at the coach, sending the loose shale sliding down ahead of them.

"Five of 'em over on this side," Anderson

called out suddenly from the other window.

"Couple more comin' down the road," Powell stated. "Must be about ten or a dozen of 'em, Cole."

"Close the shutters," Braxton ordered. He swung his own steel panel across the opening, and then shoved his shotgun through the port hole. O'Donald, with him at the window, did the same thing, and both guns boomed as the three riders coming down the slope were less than twenty-five yards from them.

Two of the three horsemen went down and the third pulled up, his mouth open in surprise. O'Donald dropped him with his six-gun just as three masked riders raced up past the horses.

Braxton's Smith & Wesson accounted for the lead rider. The other two tried to break their charge, and O'Donald doubled one with a slug through the body.

Powell and Anderson were shooting steadily from the other side of the coach, and then Powell let out an Indian whoop.

"Three down!" he roared. "They're runnin', Cole!"

Braxton yanked open the coach door and jumped out, gun in hand. Racing around the rear of the coach, he saw two riders spurring off down the road. Powell and Anderson followed him out, swearing.

"Them damned killers—shootin' right through the coach," Powell said tersely. "How in hell did they know who they was hittin'?" He reloaded his six-gun carefully.

Anderson had moved out among the fallen men. He beckoned and, when Braxton reached him, said, "Gent with the red handkerchief is still alive."

Braxton knelt and slipped the handkerchief from the wounded man's face. He was surprised to see Ben Slade staring up at him bitterly. The ex-Great Western stage driver's face was twisted in pain and hatred. Much of the blood had been drained from it, and already the pallor of death was creeping over him.

"Hell of a thing," Braxton observed, "you dyin' like a dog out here, Ben, while Jack McCann's havin' his beer in the Palace."

"Who—says—McCann sent us?" Slade muttered.

Braxton shrugged. Anderson and Powell were standing by, listening. Powell tore open the shirt and looked at the gaping hole in Slade's chest. He stood up again and shook his head.

"McCann," Braxton said softly, "Ira See and Leon Fairfax. They live off the fat of the land—gonna keep right on doin' it, too, while we bury you out here. Think of that, Ben."

"Nobody gonna patch me up?" Slade snarled. "I got rights."

"We bring you back," Braxton told him, "and you'll hang, Ben. Four of us saw you trying to hold up that coach. Not even Fairfax can get around that."

Slade started to cough and blood came up to his lips. George Powell murmured.

"He ain't goin' nowhere, Cole."

"Why stand up for them?" Braxton asked the stage driver. "They never did anything for you, Ben."

"All right," Slade gasped weakly. "I was workin' for Fairfax an' See, but I didn't shoot Bannister. Jack McCann did that." Slade was breathing deeply now, his eyes closed.

"That ain't all, Cole," he whispered after a while. "They figure on burnin' you out tonight. Your place an' the Oriental—we was supposed to get you today. Get you—good..." Slade coughed suddenly, violently. He made a sudden, convulsive effort to raise himself—then fell back.

Braxton walked back toward the coach. When the others joined him, he sent Anderson and O'Donald on through with the coach, while he and Powell set about catching the dead outlaws' mounts.

A HALF hour after sundown he rode into Crystal City with George Powell, easing in through a side street, unnoticed. He sent Powell to round up as many men as he could find, then strode towards his office.

In the shadows, to one side of the entrance, he saw a familiar buckboard, an ancient white horse in its traces—the rig belonged to Doc Walker, Crystal City's oldest physician. He quickened his steps until he was running.

The office was empty, but he could hear voices in the rear room. Doc Walker came out then, his coat off, sleeves rolled up, perspiration standing out on his face. He nodded to Braxton, too tense for surprise.

"What happened, doc?"

"Old Ned took a piece of lead in the stomach," Walker explained. "Had a hell of a time getting it out, but he'll live."

Braxton brushed past him. Two of the Great Western yard men were standing near the couch on which Ned Carver lay. The old man's eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily. His face was mottled in color.

Sim Harkness, the wheelwright, took Braxton's arm. He said, "Little after dark we hear this shot from the office. I run over with Dan here, an' we find old Ned on the floor. He's pointin' to the window which looks out on the alley. He ain't said nuthin' since."

"Shot down," Dan growled, "with him not even havin' a gun on him."

Doc Walker came back into the room, putting on his coat. He stood over Ned Carver for a few moments looking down at him.

He said to Braxton, "Business is starting pretty early tonight. I just patched up that actor chap, Melville. They found him beaten up in the alley behind Karnes' Barber Shop. The way I heard it told, you were going to start things. When you catch up, let me know. I'll keep my office open all night tonight." He made a wry face and left.

Braxton waited, but Ned Carver showed no signs of returning consciousness, so he left the building also. He hurried up the street to the Lincoln House at which the Melvilles had been staying. On the second floor he found the room. George Blackwell opened the door.

Braxton walked past him to the bed. He looked down at Henry Melville, and the veteran actor, his face swathed in bandages, winked gravely. Phyllis, her eyes swollen from crying, looked up at Braxton, but she said nothing.

Braxton said, "They just shot Ned Carver—nearly killed him."

"That's not all," Blackwell muttered behind him. "I hear McCann has about fifty of his toughs over at the Palace. They'll be up to more mischief tonight." George Blackwell slumped down in a chair.

Braxton stood with his hat in his hand at the foot of the bed. He looked down at Phyllis Melville.

"Still want me to compromise?" he asked quietly.

The girl dropped her face in her hands and her shoulders started to shake. Braxton put the hat on his head and walked from the room. He paused on the hotel porch, stared up the street toward the brightly-lit Palace, and then, instead of returning to the Great Western yards, walked to the office of the Big Bonanza.

Tom Blaine sat behind his desk, a long cigar in his mouth, very neat in the black frock coat and black string tie.

"Coach go through?" he asked.

Braxton nodded. "We shot a half dozen of the road agents," he stated quietly. "They'll never stop those coaches from now on."

"Good," Blaine said. Before Braxton could go on, he added, "I know all about it—Carver and Henry Melville."

"Sheriff Wiley still out of town?" Braxton asked grimly.

"He'll stay out," Blaine said, "and nobody gives a damn either way."

"This has gone too far, Tom. They had their chance to quit before they started. I've won every round since I started hitting back. I'm for finishing them tonight."

Blaine stared at him. "Meaning?"

"Will you back me up, Tom? I've got a plan. I can end this tonight. You fought them alone, once. Will you fight them with me?"

Blaine hesitated, then nodded. "I have fifty boys down in my shafts on the night shift. I'll pull them up and they'll meet you wherever you say in forty-five minutes."

Braxton Cole grinned. "Pull 'em up and I'll send word."

BACK at the Great Western yards, Braxton found George Powell lining up his crew.

He reported, "Joe got a crew of thirty-two. They don't know what it's all about, but when I told 'em about old Ned they said they didn't care. If this night's work sends them to hell—why, they're ready to roast the devil in his own fires."

Braxton nodded. He went into the office and found Ned Carver conscious, with Sim Harkness watching over him.

"The coach?" Carver asked weakly.

"She's through," Braxton said. "Who got you, Ned?"

The old paymaster shook his head. "I ain't got. You know who tried." His eyes burned, partly with hatred, partly with fever.

"I know," Braxton told him. "No need of your talking."

Ned stared at him a while longer, then his eyes closed and he fell into troubled sleep.

Braxton stood at the window, watching the moon rise slowly, its brilliance growing as the night deepened. At twenty minutes to nine a man came through the yards from the Big Bonanza mine.

Braxton went out, spoke to the messenger, sent him back. He found George Powell.

"All right," Braxton said. He started for the gate, and the Great Western men walked behind him. They went down the center of the street, grim-faced, making little noise.

As they neared the Palace, another procession moved to meet them. Torches flared from this second mob, lighting up the street with a murky light. Tom Blaine sauntered at the head of the second group, a long cigar in his mouth, hands in his pockets, a small man, immaculate and sure and debonair, a thin smile on his face. It occurred to Braxton Cole that Blaine would have made a good gambler, if he hadn't been a good business man.

Big, strapping miners, many of them stripped to the waist, grimy-faced, followed Blaine. Half had orthodox weapons—the others carried various mining equipment.

Blaine and Cole held a brief conference, then the former sent a man into the building. Faces appeared at the windows of the big gambling house, and then the front doors broke open and men scrambled out into the street hastily. Gamblers, bartenders, thinly-clad women followed them, faces blanching as they saw the crowd outside. Blaine's messenger came out last.

Braxton waited till all was quiet inside. He cupped his hands and called loudly, "The Palace is burning tonight. This is the last warning. All those who don't belong in there, come out!"

Jack McCann's voice boomed from the interior of the building, "Give 'em hell, boys," but nothing happened.

Then Leon Fairfax stepped through the batwing doors, smiling pleasantly.

"Now, boys," he grinned, "what seems to be the trouble?"

"We want you," Braxton told him quietly, "for the murder of Les Bannister, for the shooting of Ned Carver, and the near murder of Henry Melville."

Fairfax's grin broadened. "Pretty big charges, Cole. Can you prove them?"

"To our satisfaction he can," Tom Blaine put in.

Braxton said, "I've got a gun on you, Fairfax, but I'm not going to use it out here, unless I have to. We're burning the Palace tonight."

He saw the batwings stir slightly, and was ready when Ira See suddenly pushed the door open and leveled a six-gun at him. The fat man's face had lost its usual calmness, and Braxton realized his purpose. See figured on killing the leader of this movement and breaking up the fight before it started.

Braxton's Smith & Wesson was out and leveled as See came through the door, but he couldn't bring himself to shoot until he'd seen the flash of See's gun. He fired once just as See's gun roared.

See stumbled forward across the porch, clutching at his stomach with his left hand, and then pitched down the steps on his face. Leon Fairfax had skipped nimbly through the doors with the first shot. His gun appeared now over the top of the doors, but before it could go off, Tom Blaine shot.

The gun vanished. A small bright hole gleamed in the batwings.

"All right!" Blaine roared.

Cole snapped an order to Powell, who immediately scurried off. Blaine shouted another order for deploying his men—advice that was emphasized by a fusillade of shots from the Palace windows. Cole swore as a stray bullet went through his left shoulder.

Some of his men answered the gunfire, scatteredly, without orders. The racket of six-guns and rifles built to a crescendo and died. There was an unearthly silence.

Then the first licking flame touched the night. It grew far back from the street, at the rear of the Palace, and around it were a dozen men, watching its spreading. Men with miner's tools, banking the earth, using rocks to confine the fire to its objective.

There was gunfire again from inside the

building, but the volley was smothered by a raging fusillade from the right—and once more there was silence. Then another lick of flame and a spreading conflagration. A third small beginning grew to voracious life. . . .

Braxton, suddenly sickened by the prospective slaughter, rushed through the batwings. From here on in he wanted—more than he had ever wanted anything—to come to grips with something tangible—the fire and the holocaust were not *his* methods. He had only gotten the idea out there in the pass, where Slade had died.

Slade had been a traitor—he had sold out an honest living and died a would-be murderer—but Cole still felt an obligation as he swept his smarting eyes over the smoke-filled barroom. He heard a sound and peered up through the stifling mist and saw nothing. Then there was a crash from above, a billowing of the air, and when it settled, he found a pinheaded shadow with hulking shoulders confronting him.

His name billowed out of the mist with sacrilegious effects. He saw gunfire that seared him and crowded him against a wall.

He huddled there and fired back. He heard the hired McCann drop and thought, *That should finish it—that's all the brains the whole outfit had*—but he was wrong.

There was more shooting and the first thing he knew was when Blaine and George Powell helped him to his room, and Doc Walker came up a few minutes later.

"I'll be glad when you're done, Cole," Walker said laconically.

"It'll not be for some time," Blaine observed.

Braxton was sitting on the couch when Phyllis Melville came in, breathing hard as if she'd been running.

"We—we heard you'd been hit!" she gasped. "Father wanted to know how you were."

Doc Walker growled, "Go back an' tell your father he'll really have something to worry about if this chap does live."

"If—" her eyes dilated until Cole thought they were going to tell him things no man should ever know. And if eyes alone could say those things, he should have known them from that time on. But he didn't. And so he called after her fleeing form, "Will you marry me?"

Tom Blaine lighted a cigar and walked toward the window. Without looking at Braxton, he said softly, "If I were thirty years younger, my friend, I wouldn't let this pass by."

Braxton Cole stared at the closed door. "It won't," he murmured.

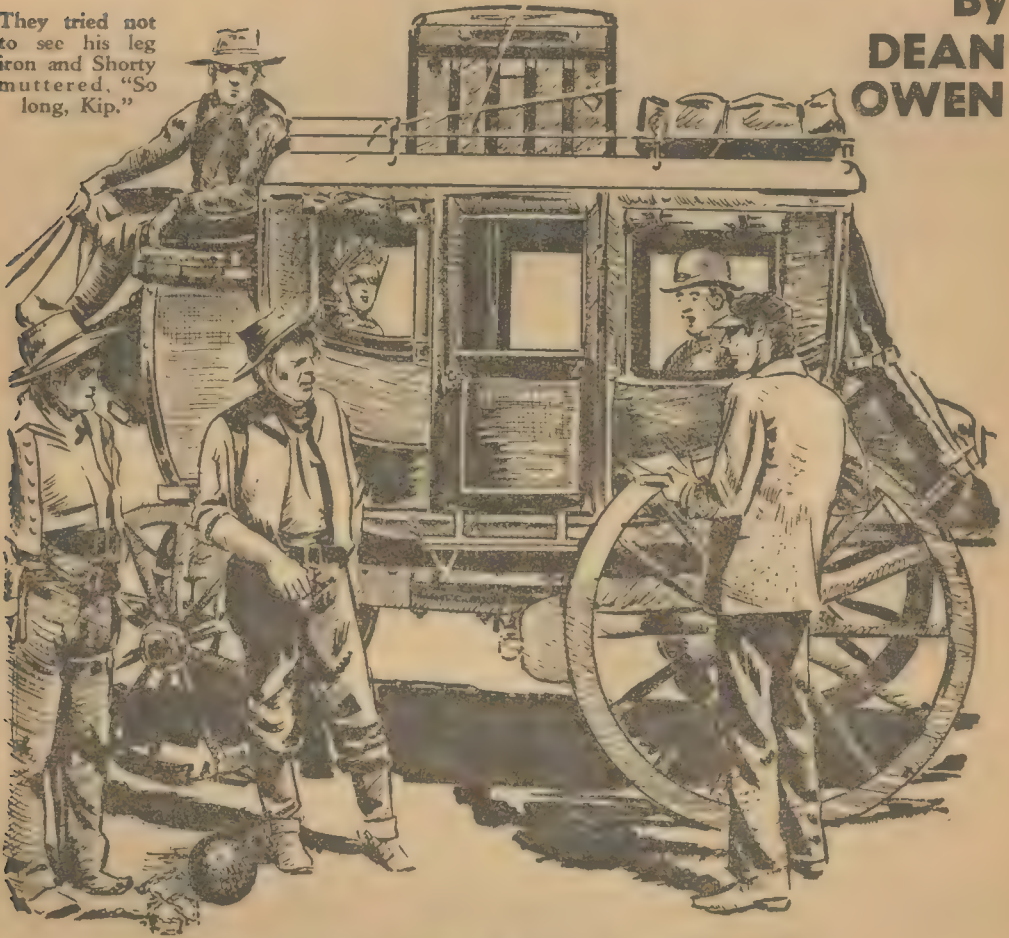
"Hold still," Doc Walker scowled.

"Hell," Tom Blaine chuckled. "The young man's in a hurry, doc."

OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE

By
**DEAN
OWEN**

They tried not to see his leg iron and Shorty muttered, "So long, Kip."



They were a little ashamed about sending the kid to jail—after all, he'd been through a war and killing was his business. But even that kind of hombre shouldn't be going around putting business before pleasure!

WHEN it came time to catch the noon stage for Carson City the deputy took Kip Sherman into the jail office at Pacheco to fit him with a leg iron. It seemed to Kip that the whole fifteen bleak years which stretched before him were symbolized

in that ten pound weight the deputy clamped around his ankle with a big padlock.

"Hate to do this, Kip," Hank Jameson said, trying not to look at his prisoner. "But sheriff says we got to use 'em. He's the boss." He put the big key in his pocket and

held the end of the ten foot length of chain, attached to the leg iron, in his hand.

Kip didn't have much to bring along, only an old comb with two teeth missing, a thumbbed copy of *Harper's Weekly* and a Mexican coin with a hole punched in the center. This had been his father's good luck piece. It hadn't brought luck to Kip Sherman.

Outside the jail office he stood in the hot dust of Pacheco's main street and looked off toward Grizzly Head, lost in the drift of clouds. And thoughts of his stone house at the foot of the mountain, and the eighty acres he had in alfalfa brought a hollow feeling to his stomach. He was leaving the toil and dreams of five years behind.

It seemed unbelievable that he would be thirty-seven years old before he would see Grizzly Head again. Fifteen years!

The stage pulled up, with Limpy Harper on the box. He tried not to look at the iron on Kip's leg.

"Howdy, Kip," he called down in a tight, strained voice. He made a great fuss about wrapping the lines around the brake handle.

On the loading platform, Shorty Crandall stood with his green shade cocked over one eye, a bill of lading in his hand. There was an embarrassed look on his long face.

"So long, Kip," he mumbled.

Kip nodded, remembering Shorty would be an old man when the fifteen years were up.

Inside the coach a fat man in a hard hat grunted and moved his sample case when Kip squeezed through the door. It was awkward moving with the leg iron and he felt like a maverick on a rope, with Hank Jameson holding the other end of the chain.

When he sat down he got a good look at the girls across from him. Two girls, but the one who caught his eye was about eighteen, he judged. Her eyes, blue as the summer sky above Grizzly Head, stared at the leg iron. He could see the pulse beat in her slender throat. She pulled her light traveling coat tighter about her.

Bitterness and anger welled up in Kip when he saw her slip a protecting arm across the shoulder of the little girl at her side. Eight years old would be about her age. Brown curls and eyes that were busy.

"You get ketched in a trap, mister?" she asked, pointing at the leg iron.

The blue-eyed girl hushed her up. Kip's cheeks were hot as he turned to stare out the window.

AND it was then he saw the man with the black beard standing beside the hitch-rail in front of Chico's Bar. He wore a flat-crowned hat and no gun in sight. But when the deputy, Hank Jameson, was getting into the coach beside Kip, the black-

bearded man raised his eyes and nodded once.

That one glance was all Kip needed. It seemed as if the leg iron and the fifteen years suddenly melted into nothingness.

That man out there was Tex, and Kip watched him swing into the saddle and ride leisurely off toward Grizzly Head. At the edge of town he put spurs to his horse and dust boiled up in a cloud in his wake.

They hadn't let him down after all. Tex and Charley and their new bunch would be waiting down the trail. When the coach started off with a lot of cussing from Limpy Harper on the box, Kip actually felt elated.

When he was out of this, it would be Mexico and a new life. His pulse quickened at the thought of freedom.

He listened to the small talk in the stage, dimly aware that the blue-eyed girl was telling Hank Jameson her name was Marsha Roberts and that she was traveling with her small sister, Angie. They were to live with their aunt in Carson City.

The fat drummer, whose name was Acklebury, was complaining of his troubles in introducing Red Indian Cigars to Nevada. He offered the deputy a cigar.

"You got one for my friend here?" Jameson asked, nodding at Kip.

The drummer looked startled at the deputy's words, then reached for his case, but Kip shook his head.

"What'd he do?" Acklebury wanted to know, poking a cigar in Kip's direction.

"Killed a man named Marley Hope," Jameson answered, trying to appear casual about it.

Kip saw that Marsha was looking at him. There was either pity or disgust deep in the blue of her eyes. He couldn't tell which, so he tried to avoid her gaze.

"When a man commits murder he ought to swing," Acklebury said.

"Nobody said it was murder," Hank Jameson snapped and the fat drummer's face turned red.

FOLKS in Pacheco took to Kip Sherman or left him alone. He was that kind of man. He believed in his friends and he stuck by them whether they were right or wrong.

He had been mustered out of the Union Army along with Tex, Charley and Sam Garnt. Things had not been easy after the war but only Kip believed in hard work, giving instead of taking. He came to Pacheco and built his stone house at the foot of Grizzly Head.

And he was doing all right, too. They liked him down at Logger's Trading Post. Now and then he would buy a round of drinks at Chico's Bar.

The coming of Marley Hope disturbed the placidity of Kip's life. Hope came through with a freighter load of grub. He took over the old harness shop and went into competition with old man Logger.

It was whispered that Hope had walked off with that wagon load of stuff, that it was consigned to a merchant in Sacramento. But nobody pressed the point and Hank Jameson didn't probe because he was having his hands full.

A gang was holing up in the mountains behind Grizzly Head, making it tough for Hank Jameson. Their depredations included holding up the banks at Dry Creek and Carson City. They were also accused of killing two prospectors.

Things came to a head the night old man Logger's place caught fire. Kip Sherman was riding into town to get some medicine, for Tex was out at his stone house, a gunshot wound in his hip. The tall Texan offered no comment and Kip asked no questions. Theirs was an old friendship, tempered on battlefields.

At this late hour there was nobody around, but Kip saw a shadowy figure run out of the gloom just as Logger's store began to burn. Kip shot the arsonist in the ankle and it turned out to be Marley Hope, who believed in his own way of destroying competition.

Hope wound up with a permanent limp as a result of that wound in the ankle. He swore to get even with Kip. But having to pay for the damage to Logger's store hurt him even more.

That next day, Hank Jameson rode out to the rock house at the foot of Grizzly Head.

"Son," the old deputy said, "you're runnin' with bad company. Tex Wright, Charley Lindsey and old man Garnt are back here some place." He waved a wrinkled hand at Grizzly Head, jutting skyward behind the stone house. "You've been givin' 'em grub. When Tex was shot up you come in for medicine."

"Maybe I got the medicine for myself."

"I ain't blind, son. I been in this law business since '43. Tex was shot when they held up the stage at Sawmill Creek. I followed a bloody trail to your house. Them three been comin' here often. I'm givin' you a chance to do your feller citizens a favor. Turn 'em in. They're no good."

"That's a strong order."

"They're only usin' you. I know them kind."

Kip's features were immobile as he got off the bench where he had been sitting outside the house. "They're my friends," he told Jameson. "You can't fight alongside men—with them willin' to die for you and you for them—not and do what you're askin' me to do.

It isn't their fault they turned out like they have."

"It's always a man's fault when he gets on the wrong side of the hill."

"They didn't have a chance after the war."

"Thousands of young fellers got mustered out, Kip, and they didn't go bad. You come here, started from scratch, worked hard and now you got a nice little outfit."

"Maybe I was lucky," Kip told the deputy.

"That ain't true," Jameson said with a shake of his gray head. "It's hard to turn in your friends, but you got to weigh things in their true light. Some day your friends are goin' to come into Pacheco and they'll get careless and kill somebody—maybe old man Logger or Chico. And they don't deserve to die like that."

Jameson got his horse and mounted, then looked down at Kip.

"I lost my own boy at Bull Run and I ain't been quite so lonesome since you come here. But I got to give you a warnin'. Cut loose from your friends. Cut loose or maybe I'll be havin' to take you in one of these days."

IN SPITE of the dust which drifted through the stage coach windows, Marsha looked cool and clean as the spring breeze which blew across Grizzly Head. And to Kip, sitting there on the hard coach seat, she was part of the dream he had built into the stone house—as impossible now as holding the sky in your hands.

Angie was asleep, nestled against her sister's protective arm. And when the coach slowed to cross Dutchman Creek, she opened her sleepy eyes and smiled at Kip.

"I'm going to tell Auntie about the nice man with the funny leg," she said drowsily.

Marsha put her hand gently across the little girl's lips to silence her. Then she looked across the coach at Kip and he knew it was pity in her blue eyes, not disgust.

Angie's remark made him conscious of the heavy iron weight on his leg. The leg was cramped and he moved it back and forth to restore the circulation.

And as Kip sat there, conscious that every turn of the coach wheels was taking him nearer his destiny, he thought of what Hank Jameson had told him the night before Marley Hope was killed.

"You got to look at things right, Kip. What's best for the majority is the way our country was built. And that's the way we got to keep on, or it'll fall apart."

There was a thousand dollars on the heads of Tex, Charley and old man Garnt. Marley Hope wanted that money for himself and the chance to kill Kip Sherman in payment for that limp. So he waited and when he saw the outlaws ride up to Kip's house, he sneaked

up to the house in the early dawn, stuck a double-barreled shotgun through the window of the one-room shack and fired. Old man Garnt was killed outright and Charley shot up. But Tex had just stepped out for a pail of water at the creek. He came around the house and shot Hope in the back.

Kip was out in the field, putting in checks to irrigate his alfalfa when it happened. Tex and the wounded Charley begged him to ride with them, but Kip refused. Then they cursed him and hit the trail. But Kip stayed behind because Hope wasn't dead yet and you couldn't leave a man to die when there was a chance of saving him.

A posse had come out from town, a mile away, attracted by the firing. They found Hope dead and Kip alone at the house.

There was nothing personal in the verdict the jury returned. It was just that Kip Sherman had shot a man in the back. And his old friends in town believed fifteen years at Carson pen was better than hanging.

THE fat drummer, Acklebury, was telling Hank Jameson some of the problems he encountered trying to peddle Red Indian Cigars.

"And it's the likes of him," he said, waving one of his cigars at Kip, "that makes the trouble."

"War sometimes makes a man different," Jameson answered.

"That's no excuse," Acklebury said with a snort. "Just because a man's learned to kill is no sign he can carry it over into his private life."

Marsha was loosening the coat tie at Angie's throat, for the day was warming up. She looked at Acklebury, the smooth line of her jaw hardening.

"Perhaps everyone cannot be as fortunate as you," she said, "never to be forced into a position where violence might become necessary."

Acklebury's face turned red and Kip could feel Hank Jameson's silent chuckle. All the gratitude in the world was in Kip's eyes as he looked across at the girl.

When the coach swayed around a sharp corner, Kip knew they were beginning the climb to Ruby Hill. Up there was the logical place for Tex, Charley and their new bunch to be waiting.

They'd gone too far along the dark trail to shy from killing, Kip knew. If Limpy didn't pull up at their first command they'd shoot him. Then there was Hank Jameson who had lost his only son at Bull Run. He would fight.

Panic suddenly worked its way through his body until his heart thudded in his ears and his hands were sweaty.

He looked across at Angie, asleep again

beside her sister. And there was Marsha, who could meet some young man at Carson City and perhaps realize her own dreams.

Tex and Charley wouldn't shoot a woman deliberately, but there would be stray bullets.

These thoughts ran their course through his mind and he thought of the fifteen years at Carson Pen. Mexico seemed but a nebulous thing, almost like the dream of the girl in the stone house at the foot of Grizzly Head.

"Tex and Charley are goin' to try and get me loose," he told the deputy suddenly.

Marsha and Acklebury showed their surprise, but Jameson shook his head. "They've drifted, son. After Marley Hope got killed they hit for new territory. Fact is, I heard they're workin' around Silver City with three new boys in their outfit."

Kip was conscious of the leg iron around his ankle. And a sudden ruthlessness swept through him. Freed of that he could ride into Mexico instead of sweating out his youth at Carson. His conscience was clear. He had told Jameson and the deputy had refused to believe him.

But he couldn't go through with this. "I saw Tex in Pacheco just before we pulled out," Kip said. "He was wearin' a new beard. He and Charley are waitin', I tell you."

Pallor spread across Marsha's cheeks and she darted an involuntary glance at her sister, sleeping there on the seat.

"Wake up, Angie," she insisted, shaking the girl. She cast a pleading glance at Kip, new respect in her eyes. Her eyes understood him, without words. *You'd throw away your own chance for freedom?*

Acklebury was nervously squirming in his seat, peering out the coach windows at the rugged Nevada countryside.

"We better turn back," he suggested hopefully.

Jameson made no answer. He seemed to be turning things over in his mind. In the meantime the coach rolled nearer the summit of Ruby Hill.

Kip said, "You'll need every hand. Give me one of your guns, Hank."

Acklebury stiffened. "Don't do it," he told the deputy. "The man's a killer. It's a trick."

"I'd trust him," Marsha said and gave the drummer a scornful glance.

Hank Jameson wore a scowl on his wrinkled face. "I reckon we better head back for Pacheco, ma'am. If there's goin' to be trouble I can't risk you gettin' hurt."

He leaned out the window to yell up at Limpy on the box and just then a gun crashed from a pile of rocks at the summit of Ruby Hill. Then another shot.

There was confusion outside, Limpy's cry of pain, the sudden lurch of the coach as one of the horses went down.

"They never gave Limpy a chance," Jameson said grimly.

He pulled a long-barreled gun from beneath his shirt and handed it to Kip: as five riders charged the coach.

Without being told what to do, Marsha had pushed Angie to the floorboard and covered the small body with her own. And she looked at Kip, a desperate plea in her eyes. Kip understood her, too. He knew it was the life of her little sister which worried her, not her own safety.

Kip was firing out the window at those charging riders, while Hank took care of the other side. Acklebury alternately moaned and prayed, while Limpy Harper's weapon sounded occasionally from the box.

The fight was short and the unexpected opposition threw panic into the outlaws. The dust was thick and Kip's throat tightened, for out there he might be killing Tex or Charley, men whose lives had been fused with his own in the desperate days of the war.

A rider swung close to the window, raised his gun and Kip shot him out of the saddle.

When the dust cleared and they got outside, Limpy was quieting his team, but the little driver was weak and sick. And Marsha tore up Acklebury's white shirt to bandage a flesh wound in Limpy's side.

Kip walked painfully toward the rocks, the leg iron weighting him down. Not far away he found Tex and Charley and another man, a stranger. The other two had run.

Charley was dead and Tex was lying on his face. He was shot in the back of the head and Kip knew that death had been swift.

He hobbled back to the coach where Marsha

was tying up the gash in Limpy's side. Angie stood beside the coach, red-eyed, her young mind unable to grasp the sudden tragedy which had struck them.

And Marsha said, "Take her inside, will you? She's seen too much as it is."

Kip sat in the coach, his arm around Angie's shoulders and gradually the little girl ceased her trembling.

Hank Jameson walked up, stood there looking in at Kip.

"I reckon you'll get a new deal, Kip," he said. "Tex told how things were with Marley Hope. He talked before he died."

"But Tex was dead—" Kip started to protest, but the deputy silenced him with a wave of his hand.

While Kip watched, the deputy unlocked the leg iron.

"You help me bury them fellers," Jameson said slowly. "Won't do for anybody to find Tex. They might ask questions."

When they finished their job with the short shovel carried in the coach, Kip looked at Hank Jameson.

"How do you know they'll believe your story?"

"Listen, son, I been in this law business since fo'ty-three. I reckon they'll take my word."

Angie stuck her small head out the coach.

"The man isn't wearing his funny leg," the little girl said.

"He'll never wear it again," Marsha put in quickly, and looked at Kip.

And he knew the dreams that had gone into the stone house, at Grizzly Head were not so impossible after all.



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MOUNTAIN MEN DON'T BLUFF

Sully kept no secrets from the men who were going to kill him—in fact, he sent them to hell with a first hand lesson on how a mountain man might die!

By CHARLES IRWIN

THE door to Sully Lane's cabin was open. For the second night in a row Sully sat just within, cross-legged, Indian fashion, on the floor. His old long-barreled muzzle-loader lay across his knees. A buffalo powder-horn and box of home-moulded lead slugs were nearby.

New-fangled weapons were in use now, like the Winchesters and Colts' that Rod Pepin and his two side-kicks packed. But the mountain man clung to his old rifle. It had been his companion and protector in the old days. It would serve him, now. And Sully Lane could still blast, pour powder, ram ball, prime pan, and blast again, five times to the minute—maybe six—with "Ol' Rigor Mortis."

Sully's eyes began to blink. He rubbed them, yawning. "Only two days an' a night an' a half without sleep," he muttered to himself. "Sully Lane, ye're a-gittin' to be an ol' man."

He rose, stretched his skinny legs around the cabin. Then he sat again. Before he knew it he was asleep.

He wakened, moving with the speed of a released coil-spring. A noise and a motion had wakened him. But he was too late. "Ol' Rigor Mortis" had been snatched from him.

Laughter sounded above. Sully looked up. A man stood over him. In the dim moonlight Sully saw it was Jake Wiley, one of Pepin's men.

"Stand up, you old fool!" Wiley ordered. Sully's rifle was in the crook of his left arm. A Colt six-shooter gleamed from his right hand. "Pepin's holdin' a little pow-pow over at the store. He's invitin' you to join in. Get movin', an' if you try to break I'll drop you."

Sully Lane knew when to ask questions and when not to. This was one of the latter whens. He favored Wiley with a vicious glare. Then he headed outside, a man of medium height, dressed in fringed buckskins and Indian moccasins. His captor followed.

Lamplight came from Lane's Trading Post, known by emigrants all the way from Independence to the Pacific Coast. The store, three cabins, and a stable with a smithy's forge before it, sat in a small inclosure. This was a stockade, built of logs and clay. The small army detail that had been stationed here in the old days had moved on.

Wiley nudged Sully into the store. Inside, fat old Floyd Montague, Sully's clerk, stood shivering—groggy and wondering. Montague was afflicted with insomnia, and was forced to take an ample dose of sleeping powder each night. He was barefooted, dressed only in undershirt and hastily donned pants with suspenders still hanging. Earmarks of the frontiersman were not his. Montague was clean-shaven, pink-cheeked.

"And I said these were nice fellows," he muttered, shaking his bald head.

Grinning, Steve Lorigan, Pepin's other henchman, guarded Montague. That morning Sully had let Lorigan use the forge. The wheels of Pepin's three wagons needed tightening and building. Lorigan had claimed he was a blacksmith by trade and could make anything out of iron. He looked like a blacksmith, barrel-chested and thick-necked.

The door to the store opened again. Rod Pepin strode in. His fingers were tightly gripped around the arm of a girl. She was half scared, half defiant.

Sully Lane, mountain man, was—up to now—lord of his surroundings. There was but one soul who could wrap him around a finger, tie him into a knot, make him stay put, and make him like it. That was this slim girl he had named Merry.

Sully ran the animal close to the stockade wall and climbed up. . . .

Eighteen years ago he had found her in a wagon, a baby orphan. The wagon tongue pointed West. But the parents were gone—starved. Then and there Sully Lane decided to open his trading post. Perhaps these things would happen no more.

Sully had named the girl well. Her dark brown eyes were the kind that danced. Over her oval face, lightly tanned and freckled, curled an abundance of blue-black hair which rippled down in back over shapely shoulders. She had reached her full height, which was medium tall, and was well rounded. Her fringed skirt and blouse were of buckskin; her boots were short and jaunty, of the type that later became popular at rodeos. Merry had a friendly, red-lipped smile for everyone, a smile that men and women alike never forgot.

The instant Sully saw Rod Pepin drag Merry into the store he lost all trace of reasoning. Before anyone knew, Sully was at Pepin's throat. Pepin was a young man, tall and wide. But down he went, with Sully on top. Pepin yelled for help.

Sully hammered, butted. In his fury, he fought with tooth and nail.

"Uncle Sully!" Merry screamed. "Behind you!"

The oldster whirled. He saw Wiley. Then Wiley's six-gun barrel came crashing along Sully's skull.

ADASH of cold water brought him to. His eyes opened. He sat up, then started to raise hands to a throbbing head. His arms felt heavy, and Sully looked at them. His wrists were shackled with bands of iron. A twelve inch chain attached them.

"A little present for you," Steve Lorigan drawled. "I made 'em at your forge." He laughed. "I promised you'd be well paid. Remember?"

"Reckon that sort of makes you our slave, Lane," Rod Pepin added. He was scratched and bruised, but he chuckled.

Something clattered at Pepin's feet.

"Take your locket, Pepin," Merry said frigidly. "Uncle Sully was right—he should have kept you out of the stockade. So this is how you pay him back!"

Pepin had given Merry the locket that morning. He'd said it had belonged to his mother. Now it flew open. In it was a picture of a woman with hourglass figure—in tights.

"I suppose *that's* your mother," Merry said.

"No," Pepin grinned. "That's a little friend of mine back in St. Louis. Chicago Connie they call her." He picked up the locket, shoved it in his pocket. "You'll wear this again, Merry, and like it!"

"Come on, Pepin," Wiley growled. He was

a tall, gaunt man, young like Pepin and Lorigan. "Find out from the old coon where he's got his pile hid."

Sully Lane was on his feet now. Pepin walked to him.

"How about that, Lane?" he asked. "There's talk clear back as far as Independence that you've made a lot of money. That's why we came 'way out here."

"Yeah," Wiley snorted. "That, an' it was gettin' a little warm for us back along the river."

Pepin snapped, "Shut up, Wiley!"

Wiley's remark didn't cause Sully much surprise. He had learned to be a bit wary of men who traveled West without wives. They were sometimes fast with guns, and anxious to get through fast. Maybe they were itching to get away from the law.

"There's forty-five thousand," Sully said. "Mebby fifty. I ain't shore. It's right down under where yo're a-standin', Rod Pepin. Ye open a trap-door, an' dig down into the ground about three feet."

His grin plainly told that they'd never get any information out of him.

Pepin snapped the back of his hand across Sully's mouth, hard. Pityingly, Merry moaned. "Hit me," Sully retorted. "Cut me or burn me. I'm the only one who knows where the money's hid. There's gold dust, coin, an' currency. Ye kin go to hell, Rod Pepin, an' take these two which ye call men along with ye!"

"We'll find it," Pepin declared. "We've got lots of time to look, too. We aren't goin' to the coast like we said, Lane—never intended to. We're stayin' right here. Ours are the last wagons comin' out this year. There'll be nobody to bother us. They told us we'd never cross the Rockies before snow set in."

"You, Wiley," Pepin started ordering, "go over the place for guns, knives, weapons. No need to chain Montague. He's harmless unless he gets hold of a gun, or gets out to bring help. But we'll keep watch day an' night to see that don't happen."

"The girl can keep her cabin. I'll take Lane's. Wiley, you an' Lorigan can take Montague's. The two old goats can sleep in the barn—or outside, an' freeze! Who cares?"

Pepin turned to Sully. "There's one reason why I'm not killin' you, now, Lane," he said. "You're our slave, understand. You're a mountain man, an' you'll guide us to hunt for fresh meat. You'll work, an' you'll do as we tell you. Is that clear?"

The old mountain man said nothing. He stared ruefully at his chains. For the first time in his life he was anything but a free man. He had been a free-trapper back as early as 1832, and was a contemporary of men like Bridger and Carson.

But he didn't blame Merry, or anyone but himself, for falling into the hands of these three owlhooters. Quickly he thought over the mistakes he had made in the past forty-eight hours.

TWO nights ago he had seen Pepin's fire to the east. The following evening he had ridden out to guide these unknown emigrants to the stockade. First off he didn't like their looks, didn't like their talk. He told them they'd have to camp outside. Merry was waiting at the gate.

"Uncle Sully," she scolded, "I heard the way you talked to those men. You ought to be ashamed!"

"Looky, gal," said Sully, "sence ye was old enough to toddle ye've smiled pitcher-books an' story-books out o' the emigrants. With that an' what yore Uncle Floyd Montague I'arned ye ye've mebbly got some l'arnin' I ain't. But ye don't know men. Yore ol' Uncle Sully, he do. I told these to keep away from we-uns. You keep away from them."

"You're still living the old days," Merry pouted. "There are no more badmen. Certainly not these. Why, I think the one in the lead wagon is downright fine-looking!"

She meant Rod Pepin. The oldest's breathing stopped for an instant. This was what he'd been fearing since Merry first showed promise of developing into a beauty, when she found the man she wanted.

Then she could have Sully's money—all but five thousand to keep Montague for the rest of his life—and go. Then Sully would give himself back to the mountains. But it had to be the right man.

In the end, Rod Pepin and his men were allowed to park their wagons in the stockade. That was mistake number one. Distrustful, Sully kept a lone vigil in his cabin all through the first night. And nothing happened.

Merry was right, he told himself at dawn. An' so was Floyd. Ye're just a jealous, suspicious ol' man, Sully Lane. 'Twere the mountings that made ye that way.

Mistake number two was when he fell asleep on the second night.

Now, both Merry and Floyd Montague were ready to admit that Sully had been right about Pepin and his side-kicks all along.

JAKE WILEY returned with a .38 revolver and a light hunting rifle from Merry's cabin. He also had two derringers that belonged to old Montague. Convinced that there were no more guns on the premises, Pepin allowed Merry to go to her cabin. The girl didn't want to leave her two old friends, but Sully told her it was best. Sully and Montague were then shoved roughly outside. Big Steve Lorigan was put on watch for the rest of the night.

The next day, Pepin, Wiley, and Lorigan began a systematic search for the money Sully Lane had accumulated over an eighteen year period. They found nothing, but they were in no hurry.

Sully and Montague became the victims of much abuse; kicks, cuffs, and ridicule. The oldsters were made to cook meals. At such times they were guarded by grinning Steve Lorigan, a six-gun dangling from his hand.

Cold breezes were beginning to blow down off the higher mountains. A habit of many

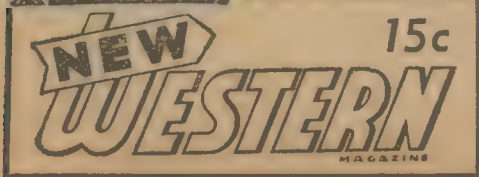
Sound The Call For Death!

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years, Sully Lane glanced often eastward. There should be snow up there before long. It was overdue. He thought of the owlhooters. Too bad winter was late this year.

Rod Pepin's approach interrupted his thoughts.

"Lorigan an' Wiley are itchin' to hunt," Pepin announced. "Besides we need meat. You'll take them to the antelope tomorrow, Lane."

Sully nodded, said nothing. Later in the day he was alone with Floyd Montague. Sully spoke a few words. Montague looked at him strangely. Then Montague handed him a small box. Sully slipped the box in a pocket of his buckskin shirt. Then he and Montague parted.

Early next morning, Sully made ready to ride with Lorigan and Wiley. They saddled three horses from Sully's stable, and brought out two pack mules. Pepin was looking on. Sully started to mount his light-footed Indian pony.

"Hold on," Lorigan snapped.

Sully paused, foot in stirrup.

"I'll take that horse," Lorigan went on. "I like his looks."

The horse stood, still and gentle, waiting for Sully to climb on. Sully looked at Lorigan.

He shook his head. "They's only one man kin ride ol' Red," he objected. "That's me."

"Get out of the way," Lorigan growled.

Ol' Red was a three-year-old bay stallion. The minute Lorigan's foot touched the stirrup the horse screamed. He laid back his ears, ducked his head, and bolted out of the barn. Lorigan threw a leg over the saddle, and hung on. Outside Red seemed to leap about five feet into the air. He came down with forelegs stiff. Lorigan went head first over the horse's neck. He landed in a heap on the dust. Red did a galloping turn around the stockade, then came back to the stable.

Sully was in no mood for laughter, even at this. But Pepin and Wiley slapped their thighs, guffawed. Angrily, Lorigan picked himself up. He lined for Sully.

"Damn you" he roared. "Why didn't you tell me that horse was an outlaw?"

"I told ye I was the only man kin ride him," Sully began.

Then Steve Lorigan's big fist went crashing into his stubbled jaw. Sully went down flat on his back. His chained wrists didn't even give him a chance to break the fall. Another dash of water brought him around.

Lorigan and Wiley were already mounted when he came to. Shakily, Sully rose, walked to the bay stallion. Red stood docilely while he mounted. Sully looked down at Pepin.

"Are ye a-goin' to send me up to the mountains without Ol' Rigor Mortis?" he asked.

"Are ye now, Rod Pepin?"

Pepin grinned. "We aren't putting any kind of gun in your hands, Lane."

"They's grizzly b'ars up there," Sully debated. "An' rattlesnakes. An unarmed man mought be a-lookin' death in the teeth."

Pepin laughed harshly. "Then let the grizzlies and the rattlers get you," he said. "It'll save us the trouble later on, anyhow!"

Sully shrugged. He followed Wiley and Lorigan out of the stockade.

"So ye want the antelope," he said, pulling up to them. "Well, we'll hit northeast. It'll be a long ride. I hope you-all are used to the saddle."

"Just lead the way," Lorigan growled, "And keep your mouth shut."

AND Sully led the way. They went up the western slope of the Rockies, always up. They rode through canyons, and over winding trails that could hardly be called trails.

"Dusk is the time t'git the antelope," Sully told them. "They's three-four water holes I know of—likely spots. We'll camp away from one. When the critters come down to drink ye kin git two-three apiece, mebbly four. But if a grizzly takes a notion he's thirsty 'long about that time, the show's off. I can't promise nothin'."

Sully led all the way. Close behind him rode Lorigan and Wiley, each with one of the pack mules roped to his pommel.

Wiley spoke to Lorigan. "What if Pepin finds that money while we're up here?" he wondered. "Won't he make tracks—for parts unknown?"

Sully turned in the saddle to see Lorigan shake his head.

"Pepin might like to do that," Lorigan laughed. "But he'd be scared. We could track him down. And he knows I'd kill him with my bare hands!"

Thick foliage kept most of the sun out. It seemed later than it really was when Sully reined in. Lorigan and Wiley pulled abreast.

"We'll leave the animals here," Sully told them. "We'll come back an' make camp later. It's best to go on afoot. They's a good water hole nearby. We'll tramp downwind from it, an' wait in the bresh."

He helped his two captors unsaddle and tie the animals. Then he started walking. Lorigan and Wiley followed, Winchesters in hand, six-guns strapped to their waists.

"Lay yore feet down easy," Sully warned. "Moccasins is better fer huntin' than boots."

At last they reached a knoll. It overlooked a clear pool of a mountain stream. Dusk was falling.

"Git down in the bresh," Sully directed. "The critters'll come to the drink afore long. We'll see. Let 'em git their noses in the water

afore ye shoot. They'll run like hell after the first blast. Ye'd best pour lead fast. Dang it, I wisht I had Ol' Rigor Mortis."

"Reckon you do," Lorigan chuckled.

They waited. Pretty soon Wiley began to shiver. "It's blasted cold up here," he complained.

Sully looked up at the sky. Clouds were gathering. The mountain man predicted snow before midnight. But he kept the prediction to himself.

It wasn't long before a couple of pronghorns came into view. They sniffed, cast wary glances around. Then they cautiously went down to the stream. Lorigan was ready to shoot. Sully stayed him with a gesture. More antelope came. In short order nine or ten were at the drink. Then Sully gave his trigger-finger a jerk.

Lorigan and Wiley raised their Winchesters. Their two blasts sounded as one. Two antelope dropped where they stood. The others wasted no time. The hunters fired after them. Wiley got one more, but Lorigan missed.

"Hold yore fire!" Sully yelled. "The show's over now." He stood. "Meat there for a spell," he said.

"Yes, and you'll butcher it," Lorigan growled. He was angry over Wiley's gloating grin because he'd dropped his second antelope.

They walked down to the pool, looked the kill over. Then, grinning, Wiley headed for the animal his second shot had downed.

Suddenly a whirring sounded. Wiley screamed. Sully and Lorigan wheeled. They saw something long slither away through the grass.

"Rattler," Sully spat. "Got him in the leg!"

Wiley came limping back. His trembling now was not from the cold, but from stark fright. His face was white as death.

"I'll die," he groaned.

"Shut up, you fool!" Lorigan said without pity. He was plenty scared, himself. He turned to Sully. "You're a mountain man," he said. "What do you do in a case like this?"

"Set down, Jake Wiley," Sully said. "Lemme have a look-see."

He rolled up Wiley's pants leg. Two little round holes showed just above the man's boot-top.

"First a tournickay," Sully muttered. "Then—" he looked into Wiley's face—"I'll have to cut."

"No!" Wiley gasped. He pulled back. "You damned billygoat—"

Sully was unable to suppress a sneer. Not much of a man, this, he decided.

FROM his shirt pocket the mountain man drew the box Floyd Montague had given him.

"Take some o' this, Jake Wiley," he said, handing over the box. "Take plenty. Chew it up. Swaller it."

"What is it?" Wiley asked.

"Medicine," Sully asserted. "It's made o' the root of a tree, ground up. Only the mounting men an' the Injuns knowed about it. It's a pain-killer, cures 'most anythin'. Ye'll never ketch ol' Sully Lane without his cure-all. A big dose, and ye'll never feel the cuttin', Wiley. Take it. An' a rattler'll never strike at a man loaded with this."

"Then why didn't you give us some before, you old fool?" Lorigan snapped.

RIDE WIDE OF GUN-GHOST RANCH!

That was the warning they gave the big Jolly Britisher, Norman Farnsworth. . . . But unless Farnsworth could break the murderous "ha'ant" at Haunted Cabin Ranch, he knew how slim would be his chance of riding out of there without a bushwhack bullet in his back! Read Walt Coburn's smashing novel—

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"Ye didn't ask me, Steve Lorigan," Sully retorted.

There was a strange light in his gray eyes as he watched Wiley pour a good portion of the powder into his mouth. Then Lorigan took the box. He emptied the balance down his throat.

Meanwhile, Sully removed Wiley's neckerchief. He started to fashion the tourniquet. By the time he had it around Wiley's leg, the man was drowsy. His eyes were half closed. Finally they closed altogether.

Sully turned to see Lorigan lower unsteadily to the grass. The big man's head was swaying on his shoulders. He looked at Sully through sleepy eyes.

"What did you say that stuff was?" he inquired thickly.

"Well, now," Sully drawled, "I don't reckon givin' it a name. He grinned. "That's some o' Floyd Montague's sleepin' powder. He has it shipped out from the East. It's a mighty big dose you-all taken."

Crouching, he watched narrowly. Lorigan was fighting sleep. His hand closed around the butt of his six-gun. Slowly, laboriously, he started pulling. Inch by inch the gun came up. He pointed it waveringly at Sully. As he blasted, his arm fell. The gun thudded to the ground. Steve Lorigan was sound asleep.

Sully Lane then sprang to his feet. "Sleep, blast yore hides!" he yelled. "The b'ars'll git ye afore ye wake up. An' if the b'ars don't the wolves will! An' if neither o' them does, it's a pair o' unlucky polecats ye'll be!

"'Cause the snow's a-coming'! Yes-sir, she's a-comin' down right now! Ye'll never find yore way out, now—not where ol' Sully Lane brung ye, ye won't!"

He bent over Lorigan, grasped the six-gun. Jamming the muzzle against the chain that held his wrists, he pointed the gun away from him. He laid the chain against a tree bole to keep from breaking his wrists. It was a tight squeeze, but he triggered. The chain broke. Sully flung his arms wide. Once again he felt like a free man, even though the wrist bands were still on.

Then he pulled Lorigan's bowie knife from the scabbard. Longingly, he looked at the scalps of the sleeping men. He shook his head, as if shaking away an evil thought.

"I won't do it," he muttered savagely. "We used to raise plenty ha'r in the old days. But Merry wouldn't like it. That gal's done made a civilized man out o' me!"

Instead he carved a few choice cuts from the antelope. Helping himself to Wiley's belt, he tied the meat together, slung the load over his shoulder. He procured a supply of bullets for Lorigan's six-gun. At a high lope, he set out for the spot where the horses and pack mules were hitched.

The snow was a good two inches deep when he arrived. He saddled Ol' Red. Then he roped the other animals together, strung them out behind, mounted, and started down the slope.

GRAY dawn was breaking when Sully sighted the stockade ahead. Down here there was no snow. Sully tied the other animals to a tree, and clicked the bay on. He rode slowly, cautiously to the wall. Standing on the saddle, he gave an upward jump. His fingers gripped the top board. He hoisted himself up.

Rod Pepin appeared before Sully's cabin, gun in hand. Apparently he had heard the noise Sully made. He was coming out to investigate. He saw the mountain man perched on the wall. Sully sprang down into the inclosure as Pepin fired. The slug burned Sully's shoulder.

He went to his knees. But he was up again, cursing the toy gun he held in his right hand. He fired. Grim-lipped he came on toward Pepin and Pepin started backing into the cabin. Sully came on, lead peppering around him. He was close enough now to see terror on the face of Pepin. The man was unnerved. He was at the cabin door when Sully halted. The oldster leveled Lorigan's six-gun. He fired once more. Pepin slumped down.

Merry came from her cabin. She scampered into Sully's arms.

Sully held her. "Are ye all right, gal?" he asked.

"Yes," she told him. "But you—your shoulder is bleeding." She looked fearfully at Pepin.

"A scratch," Sully grinned. He waved a greeting to Floyd Montague as the fat man came from the barn.

"And the other two men?" Merry inquired. "Lorigan and Wiley?"

"They'll be no more trouble," Sully said with finality. He looked at Pepin. "I knowed this wasn't the right man fer ye, gal. When the right man comes, ye kin go."

"Uncle Sully," the girl objected. "When the right man comes he'll want to stay here and help with the work. I'll never leave you, Uncle Sully!"

Later Sully Lane went into his store. At the exact spot where Rod Pepin had been standing the night of the capture, he pulled back a bearskin rug. Under it was a trap door. Sully dug down about three feet—until he struck a steel box. He opened it. There was the gold dust, the coin, and the currency.

Sully grinned. "Reckon them fellers never had sense enough to know mounting men don't bluff," he muttered. Then he corrected himself. "Well, mebbey sometimes they do—like about sleepin' powder, an' sech."

THE MIRACLE OF SERGEANT JONES

Between cannonades, Sergeant Jones roared cusswords and prayers. . . .



||

A cannoneer finds it difficult ever to forget his "wagon guns" and Sergeant Jones loved those decrepit old cannon. And the miracle of it was that they loved him, too—and when he cussed them out, they cussed louder!

||

By

C. W. Chamberlain

IF THE Indians are hungry, let 'em eat grass for all I care!"

Andrew J. Myrick, trader at the Lower Minnesota Agency, gave that unfeeling answer to the redskins pleading for long overdue government rations.

A week later, on August 18, 1862, the agency buildings were completely destroyed and every person at the post on the Minnesota River massacred. When Myrick's body was found, his mouth had been stuffed with prairie grass!

Fifteen miles away was Fort Ridgely, under the command of Captain John S. Marsh, of the Fifth Minnesotans. He quickly learned that the Sioux uprising was of nightmare proportions and immediately dispatched a messenger to Fort Snelling for added troops. Meanwhile, he took a skeleton force to meet the savages at the agency ruins.

Overwhelmed by superior numbers, this party was attacked and forced back to the fort with half their men dead, including Captain Marsh. The officer had been a gallant but inadequate Indian fighter.

That night was one of horror and suspense to the handful of soldiers and non-combatants at Fort Ridgely. Lieutenant Thomas P. Gere, now commander of the few troops left, expected another attack at any moment. Every available man was kept on the alert and put to work, strengthening the pitiful defenses. Had the savages not been so busy with their loot from the agency and other sources, they easily might have seized the fort that first night.

The next morning more than one hundred and fifty refugees from the surrounding area came pouring into the post. Later it was learned that nearly a thousand whites had been slaughtered and hundreds taken captive. A few of the refugees were settlers and traders who could be used as fighters. But it was the arrival of Lieutenant Timothy J. Sheehan, with more than a hundred troops, that meant the most to the fort, even though nearly all of the soldiers were raw recruits, since most of the regular army was fighting the war with the Confederacy.

Finally, on the morning of August 20th, the Sioux were massed for the expected attack, under Chief Little Crow. The first onslaught carried the bloodthirsty savages through the first and second lines of defense, including the log barracks forming the north wall of the fort.

The desperate Lieutenant Sheehan finally rallied his raw troops on the parade ground. If the soldiers failed to hold this area, the fort was doomed. The women and children had been placed inside the powder magazine with a man ready to blow up the fort if the troops failed to repel the next attack.

What happened next was nothing less than a miracle—with the Indians inside the walls and vastly outnumbering the whites.

THERE were a few veteran troops in that command and one of them was an ex-artillery sergeant by the commonplace name of Bill Jones. A cannoneer finds it difficult to ever forget his "wagon guns," as the Indians called them. Yet Jones was now an infantry sergeant, attached to a fort that no longer was an artillery post.

Like all gunners, he had loved to fool around

with old broken-down cannon and that was all there was at Fort Ridgely—an odd assortment of varied calibers, long since abandoned but kept on the records, as army red tape demands, for obscure reasons.

Garrison life at best is monotonous and at the sergeant's suggestion, a number of the infantrymen had volunteered to learn artillery drill. Perhaps the old fellow's stripes and command of noncom profanity had something to do with the privates "volunteering" for cannon practice. At any rate, a number of men had been drilled with the old discarded field-pieces and, for the first time, they were to be allowed to fire the superannuated artillery. Powder was available, but the cannon balls were of odd sizes and did not fit the guns.

Hastily calling his amateur cannoners out of the formation, Jones set part of them wheeling the artillery into position, while the others were dispatched to bring up every piece of junk metal or hardware that could be rammed down the muzzles of the cannon.

It was a strange assortment of ammunition that was collected by those desperate men, while the other troops were holding off the savages. Outsize cannon balls, buckshot, broken links of ox-chain, bolts and spikes, shell-cases, brass and copper kitchen utensils, hastily broken-up iron pots, even knives, forks and spoons, went into the muzzles of those decrepit cannon.

It took time to get the guns ready, for those men were only novices. Sergeant Jones was wildly desperate. His wife and children were in the powder-house with the other noncombatants, and he saw Lieutenant Sheehan's troops waver and break on the parade ground. The savages were pushing relentlessly forward and soldiers were falling steadily before the merciless fire of the Indians.

Cursing his raw artillery squads with skin-searing profanity, the frantic veteran watched his men load the ancient guns with the collected junk, tamp down the charges, and level the muzzles at the savages—now rapidly advancing with triumphant yells.

He roared, "Fire at will!"

Half expecting to see the cannon burst at their breeches, Jones roared out prayers between his frenzied explosions of profanity. The old guns belched fire, canister, grape-shot, chain-shot and what have you.

Frantically, and with desperate speed, the men madly rammed home the next charge, not waiting to see what had happened to the Indians.

The sergeant cursed them roundly for their awkward slowness. The smoke obscured the enemy and the next cannonade ripped into the murk with devastating results.

"Keep those guns hot!" the sergeant yelled. And another round was rammed home.

The next charge blasted the rear of the now panic-stricken foe, for Indians never could stand up to the "wagon guns." The heterogeneous missiles thundered into the fleeing savages and even Chief Little Crow got a painful taste of the makeshift cannister.

The retreat was now general and the soldiers cheered as the old guns continued to rip into the terrorized enemy.

The wounding of Little Crow and the loss of many warriors took much of the enthusiasm out of the redskins. It never had occurred to them that the decrepit wagon guns would be serviceable. Hadn't their scouts investigated them and pronounced them useless? However, the savages continued to besiege the fort and the next morning, under the subchieftains, Cut Nose and Mankato, tried a last, halfhearted assault.

Again Sergeant Jones and his antique artillery broke the ranks of the savages. His

men no longer were raw artillerymen! They were now veteran cannoneers and could load the rusty guns with anything at hand. Such improvised havoc was too much for the savages and they soon withdrew to seek less dangerous prey.

The miracle of the age-worn cannon not only had saved the fort but Sergeant Bill Jones and his guns had convinced the Indians that the white man could not be swept back from the frontier. They made later attacks on settlements and isolated ranches but additional United States troops soon had them under control.

The sergeant was cited in the dispatches to Washington—but in his own modest report he simply stated that his men and ancient guns "Gave much satisfaction to all who witnessed the action."

Chief Little Crow was not reached for immediate comment.

GUNS ACROSS THE RIO

(Continued from page 51)

was low-voiced, quiet, unassuming, a devout church member and possessed a comfortable fortune in land and money. For years he served as superintendent of a Sunday school in the little border town of Ysleta, near El Paso.

One of Captain Hughes' most noted exploits was the killing of Florencio Carrasco, a notorious bandit of the upper Rio Grande border. Hughes was on a lone trip to a remote part of the Big Bend region, at that time a veritable nest of criminals, hunting for Desidario Duran, a Mexican outlaw, wanted for murder and other crimes.

Hughes surprised Duran in a little *jacal* and captured him. He took his prisoner to Jim Windham's store on the Texas bank of the Rio Grande and chained him to a post, pending a start back to civilization.

While in the store Hughes overheard a Mexican remark that Florencio Carrasco was camped in a little strip of timber that bordered the river. Hughes, who had been looking for Carrasco for some time, but who had temporarily abandoned the chase to go after Duran, decided that the opportune moment had come to effect his capture. He mounted his horse and rode straight to Carrasco's camp.

THE outlaw was reinforced by half a dozen members of his band. Hughes called out to them, demanding their surrender. The Mexicans started for the brush, firing as they ran. Carrasco stood his ground for a moment, attempting to draw his gun. Hughes beat him to the draw, killed his man instantly.

Captain Hughes was with Captain Frank Jones, commander of another Ranger company, when Jones was killed in a fight with Mexican outlaws below San Elizario. The Rangers were on the hunt for Servio Olguin and his uncle, Antonio Olguin, who were widely known as thieves and murderers.

The Rangers trailed the Olguins across the old river bed of the Rio Grande to a Mexican village where the outlaws took refuge in an old adobe building. As they approached, the Olguins opened fire. Jones was killed early in the battle, but lived long enough to raise himself on one elbow and wound one of the outlaws.

As the battle progressed the Rangers learned that several friends of the Olguins were in the building, aiding them in the fight. The Rangers demanded their surrender. The Mexicans refused. The battle raged for hours. Finally the Mexicans were all either dead or wounded and threw a white shirt out of a window as a token of surrender. There were twenty-five in all.

In 1884 Captain Hughes chased a band of horse thieves more than 3,000 miles. He took up the trail near Austin, followed it out through West Texas, up into the Panhandle and down through New Mexico to a point near Silver City, where he captured two of the outlaws and lodged them in jail.

Ordinarily incidents such as the raids into Mexico by the Rangers would have caused international complications. But because of the disturbed condition of the border in the sixties, seventies and eighties, both the American and Mexican governments apparently decided to take them as a matter of course.

TALES of the

by LEE

BILL TILGHMAN (FRONTIER MARSHAL)

BILL TILGHMAN, ONE OF THE DEADLIEST OF THE OLD GUN-FIGHTING U.S. MARSHALS—AND HE NEITHER SMOKED NOR DRANK—SERVED HIS APPRENTICESHIP AS DEPUTY AT DODGE CITY UNDER THE GREAT WYATT EARP.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE CATTLEMAN KILLER OF DORA HAD, QUEEN OF THE DANCE HALLS, BILL AND HIS POSSE WERE OVER-TAKEN BY A HAILSTORM OF TERRIFIC VIOLENCE. THEY RACED FOR AN OVERHANGING BANK AND FLUNG THEMSELVES BENEATH IT JUST IN TIME TO SAVE THEIR LIVES.

DOUBLING AS A BUFFALO HUNTER DURING AN OFF SEASON, TILGHMAN SHOT 3,300 IN 6 MONTHS, ESTABLISHING A RECORD FOR HIDE TAKING.

A FULL MARSHAL, HE HELPED POLICE THE BOOMER STAMPEDE INTO INDIAN TERRITORY IN THE FAMOUS LAND RUSH OF '89.

ORDERED TO GET BILL DOOLIN'S GANG OF DARING BANK & TRAIN ROBBERS, TILGHMAN DISGUISED HIS POSSE AS A CATTLE OUTFIT, RODE INTO INGALLS, WHERE THE OUTLAWS WERE CAROUSING, BESIEGED THE TOWN'S 2 HOTELS AND FOUGHT A BLOODY BUT INDECISIVE GUN BATTLE WITH THEM.



OLD WEST



FOLLOWING THE GANG, TILGHMAN SOUGHT SHELTER FROM A SNOWSTORM AT ROCK FORT RANCH. NOTICING GUN BARRELS PROTRUDING FROM A TIER OF CANVAS-DRAPE BUNKS, HE BEAT A HASTY RETREAT. FORTUNATELY DOOLIN BELIEVED IN THE CODE OF THE WEST WHICH FORBODE SHOOTING A MAN—EVEN A MARSHAL—IN THE BACK.

THE OUTLAWS SCATTERED BUT TILGHMAN ACCOUNTED FOR THEM ONE BY ONE UNTIL DISGUISED AS A CITY DUDE, HE GOT THE DROP ON DOOLIN HIMSELF IN THE LOBBY OF THE EUREKA SPRINGS HOTEL.

THE OUTLAW RESISTED. TILGHMAN COULD HAVE SHOT HIM, BUT HELD HIS FIRE—AND REPAID DOOLIN'S FAVOR AT ROCK FORT RANCH. DOOLIN LATER BROKE JAIL AND FELL UNDER THE BULLETS OF A TILGHMAN POSSEMAN.



IN 50 YEARS OF ROUNDING UP BADMEN—AND WOMEN—BILL WAS FIRED AT POINT BLANK 100 TIMES—AND WOUNDED ONLY ONCE. A BERSERK COWBOY HE WAS ESCORTING TO JAIL SHOT THE 70-YEAR-OLD MARSHAL DEAD WITH A GUN CONCEALED IN HIS POCKET.



Smart Hombre

By EVERETT M. WEBBER

THE morning was hot. Already there was a faint stench from the coyote Bender had dropped yesterday as he rode in from town, but a buzzard, scouting idly upwind, had not yet located it. This time tomorrow, Bender reflected with a remote corner of his mind, a man would have to give the place a very wide berth. That was a thing he couldn't bear—the death smell.

Then, a bit farther on, he forgot such matters entirely and gave his full attention to the business at hand. The aromatic odor of burning spruce from Crane's cookstove came to him as he reached the creek. Bender stopped to let his horse drink and, sliding from the saddle, he dropped to his belly and drank also. It might be some little time before he had a chance to wet his gullet again. It paid to be smart, he reflected, and careful.

He sat on his haunches, then, coolly going over the thing he had decided to do, to see if his plan could be improved upon. It wasn't that he really wanted to do away with Crane. It was just that circumstances—and Crane—made it necessary. He had come upon Crane several weeks ago, panning gravel just below here in the creek—in the very act, in fact, of taking a small nugget and some bits of dust from his pan and dropping them into a buckskin bag which already must have held five or six ounces.

He was so surprised that he revealed his presence to the gnarled old man before he had time to reflect. Crane, kneeling in the sand before the outcropping ledge of rock, stared at him for one startled moment and then he thrust the bag into his shirt. He had the reputation of being slightly cracked from his long years of prospecting before settling down here and, creaking to his feet, he dragged a rusty old gun out of his waistband and waved it at Bender. His watery blue eyes were fierce.

"Git!" he shrilled. "Git your carcass off'n my land and keep it off, you skulkin' varmint!"

Bender had cursed himself a thousand times for not killing the old man then, while he could put up a pretty good story of self-defense.

Instead, he had said, "Why, sho'ly, friend, if that's the way you feel."

Play it safe and play it friendly. That had been Bender's motto for so many years of living by his wits that he had acted instinctively on it at the moment. Have the reputation of being a peaceable man, watch the corners, take your tallies when the pay-off moment

came and then, like as not, you wouldn't even be arrested. And if you were, the jury would turn you loose, and you could move to new country where you had never killed anybody, even justifiably, and start again.

Legally, of course, he could go in there and pan, but the minute he did, if Crane didn't pot him one, here would come ten dozen other people staking claims. The creek was evidently not rich—just poor to fair—for he had lain in the spruce since then watching the old man, and mostly all he got was dust. But even dust counted up, and Crane must have a goodly hoard of it somewhere—and, beyond that, it had come from some place to begin with.

There was a mother lode, and evidently on Crane's land, for Bender had worked the creek above it with no sign of yellow. He had also worked below Crane's land, with no sign, but the water was swift there all the way to the river, with no sand on the rock bottom and no chance for dust to settle, except for a speck here and there in a crevice.

Once, crossing Crane's place, a warning shot had buzzed above Bender. He knew the old man was watchful, and it was his watchfulness that was going to lead to his undoing now.

Bender took another drink, eyeing his reflection in the water as it came to meet him, and then as it receded when he stood up. Yes, his plan was good. There was no way to improve it.

He led the horse back into a drogue of spruce, well away from the creek, and loosed the cinch and dropped the reins. A 30-30 was in the boot, but he left it there. He didn't need a gun in this deal.

He went up the creek on foot, carefully leaving no tracks as he kept to the rocks, and then struck out to come upon Crane's shack from upwind. He wanted a smoke but he decided against it for the moment, and drew forth a plug of Red Mule. Reaching for his jack-knife, he swore briefly. The knife was in his town breeches, back home. He haggled off a chaw with strong, yellow teeth, and skulked on through the scattering brakes.

HE HAD waited nine days, since he thought of his scheme, for the wind to blow out of the north so he wouldn't have to lug the body from hell to breakfast to dispose of it. He held his wet finger in the breeze. It lacked a point or two of being right,



||

Play it safe and play it friendly was Bender's motto. Why, if you played it right, you could even teach a man to kill hisself. Then Bender learned his own lesson a little too well!

||

"Git!" he shrilled. "Git your carcass off my land and keep it off. . . ."

now, but it would do. Half a quarter above the cabin, he hunkered in the boulders and rolled a cigarette and lit it. He sucked violently and watched the clouds of smoke dance down the wind and spread and vanish. But while the smoke was vanished to the eye, a nose could pick up the traces much farther away than the shack.

He heard Crane singing in a high, cracked voice, but he smoked the entire cigarette without bringing him out, and it suddenly occurred to him that maybe the old fellow was smoking himself and didn't notice this. He swore a little and rolled another, thick this time, and once more he gauged the wind. Maybe that was the trouble. He crawled through the rocks to a point barely twenty feet away before he lit up.

He waited.

The effect was miraculous. Unbelievably quick, old Crane came out of his cabin and peered in Bender's direction and Bender froze. The smoke drifted faintly off the cigarette between his stained fingers.

Crane hobbled back into the shack and, while he had the chance, Bender skulked swiftly northward toward the old mine shaft where he would leave the body. Almost at it, he rolled another cigarette, lit it from the one he was smoking, and laid it on a rock on the floor of the canyon.

His feet were burning in his boots from the blistering stone. His clothes drenched with sweat, he made his way up a drift in the canyon wall. There was an outcropping of mesquite there, on top, where a bit of shade fell from still higher ledges part of the day. In its scant protection, Bender lay, slowly broiling. A gadfly spun and buzzed around him and he twitched and jerked to drive it away whenever it lit upon him.

He could see a good distance back toward Crane's shack, but, though he watched carefully, he caught no sign of the old man. Well, maybe it wouldn't work today, but it would make Crane more watchful, and there would be lots of days now, with the wind blowing right.

By stretching his neck a bit, Bender could see the lip of the mine shaft, blasted by some hopeful—nobody knew when or who—in the canyon floor fifty feet past the cigarette which burned steadily there below. The hole was eight feet across and, while it was only about fourteen feet deep, a tumble into it could conceivably kill a man. At least, he would stay in there till he died for want of water, so when the clean bones were found, maybe a year or two years or twenty years from now, no one would think much about it. Still, the thought was not pleasant.

Bender grunted and slapped at the fly, which had sunk its red hot needle of a beak into his

shoulder. He didn't dislodge it, and as he struggled to reach the thing his nerves tightened at the sound of Crane's approach. He had to bear the biting for fear of being seen and he lay clenching his teeth, watching the old man coming along the canyon below, hunkered low. His rusty old six-shooter was in his hand, and he kept looking warily ahead and throwing his nostrils up a bit to sniff the cigarette which was barely hidden from him by a slight turn of the wall.

Bender waited, forgetting even the fly—and then, when the old man was below him, he lifted the twenty pound rock he had ready and hurled it down. Crane must have heard some sound or had some warning. He looked up, gave a startled, broken yell and dodged. The rock struck him on the side of the head and sent him into a twisting heap and, as he struck, his gun went off. The bullet shrilled away and, slapping at the fly, Bender cursed violently. It would be just his luck for some chance rider to hear that shot and drift over to investigate.

Scrambling down the break, he picked up the rock he had used. There was a faint smear of blood upon it, and a wisp of graying hair. He ran with it to the mine shaft and dropped it into the sheer depth and as it crashed he turned and went back and jerked up the now-still body. It was much heavier than he had counted on, but his sudden surge of fear had given him strength, and he was almost running as he approached the shaft again. He would go back and get the gun.

He had already started to throw the body in when it occurred to him that the sack of dust might be upon it. He made an involuntary clutching motion, heaving backward, but it was too late. He lost his balance and his footing and, still half holding the body, pitched into the shaft.

He landed heavily on top of Crane, and he heard the snap of bone and he knew that it was his own wrist. He struggled to his feet, staring at the man he had killed and then at his wrist.

Dazed, he listened.

All the land was silent. Except for the beating of his own heart there was no sound of any kind. He twisted his head back. Across the circle of sky, above the smooth, straight rock wall of the shaft, he saw the buzzard hunting the coyote. And then another—one, two, three of them—

The sweat dried suddenly upon his body, and his mouth was dry and cottony and he thought for a second he could already smell the death odor in here. And he didn't even have a knife to cut his throat. With his good hand he clawed at the unyielding rock, and then a cry, harsh and wild and fearful, broke from his lips.

A match burst into flame
and the blacksnake sounded
like a pistol shot. . . .



STAMPEDE TO GLORY

By JAMES SHAFFER

II

Jace Malloy had tamed his last hell-town, fired his last gun—he'd sworn never to send another glory-hunter to Glory. But the day can come to any man when it's a gun-smoke showdown—or death!

JACE MALLOY walked into the Peacock Saloon, and came face to face with Sling Wicker. Wicker's hand streaked for his holstered gun.

The sight of the little gunman hit Jace like an electric shock. He had stopped just inside the batwing doors of the saloon, and now his body was motionless, in an awkward, off-balance stance.

"Forget it, Sling. I'm not packing an iron." His lips were stiff as he spoke; his voice hoarse and unnatural.

Sling's beady eyes narrowed warily. He was a small man and, had you not known of

their grim record, the big guns strapped around his skinny waist would have looked comical.

"I'll be—Jace Malloy! And no gun!"

"I haven't worn a gun in the two years I've been in Stampede, Sling," Jace said.

Sling shook his head, wonderingly. "Hard to believe," he muttered. "Jace Malloy not packing an iron. There's plenty gents with scores to settle with you."

"Some of those gents have already been in town," Jace said slowly. "They hung around a while and pulled out when they saw I didn't aim to put a gun on."

"Some guys got no patience," Sling said.

"Some of them," Jace said pointedly, "had more patience than you got."

He turned and walked out, feeling Sling's narrow eyes on his back. He walked over to Hi Moran's general store and started getting his order of supplies. But his mind was wandering, and finally Hi just took his list and started filling the order himself.

The sight of Sling Wicker had brought the past crowding back to Jace—a past that had been filled with the roar of gunfire, and swift, sudden death. Memories crowded around him like living things; memories of watching a man walk toward him in a slow, stiff stride; a blur of movement, the sickening jar of gunfire; of himself stalking others, and peering through a blue haze of gunsmoke to watch a man buckle and fall. And one memory was more persistent than all the rest. The memory of the last fight he'd had while he was wearing a law badge.

Something had happened to him that day. Something that had never happened before. Something that had caused him to take the badge from his shirt and hang up his guns. Yes, the memory was still there—strong as ever.

It blotted out, for the time being, the gnawing worry of his present troubles with Bailey Hawkins.

As he was loading his supplies in the buckboard, his jaw tightened. *The past is over and done with, he thought. I've proven that. Other men have come to Stampede to settle old scores with me, and they left with no gunfight. So it will be with Sling Wicker. I'll not let dead things come back to life.*

He was ready to climb in the buckboard when he saw Steve Humbolt coming down the sidewalk. Jace took his foot off the wheel hub and waited. Steve Humbolt, the sheriff of Stampede, was younger than Jace. *About the same age, though, Jace thought, as I was, when I first pinned on a law badge.*

"Morning, Jace."

"Hi, Steve. What's on your mind?"

Steve took his time about answering. He built a smoke, and Jace noted with satisfac-

tion his sure deliberate actions. A man had to be that way—to wear a badge.

"There's another one in town, Jace," Steve said, tossing the match aside.

Jace nodded. "Sling Wicker. I shot Sling's owlhoot partner, and put one bullet in Sling himself."

"So you've seen him?"

"Sure—there's nothing to worry about. He'll drift on, just like the others did. I'll not come to town again till he leaves." His next words brought a dull flush to his face. "Tell Elsie that for me, will you? She'll understand."

BUT deep down, he didn't know whether she would or not. He'd tried to explain to her why he stayed clear of town at certain times, but he'd seen the puzzled look in her eyes. Her brother was a lawman who lived by the gun—exactly as he himself had been one. And in all his explaining he had never told her why he changed.

"You might be out of town for quite some time," Steve said dryly.

"No such thing," Jace snapped. "Sling's like all the rest—he'll drift on in a few days."

Steve Humbolt flung his smoke away, as if it had suddenly become distasteful. "Maybe. Maybe not. Sling was asking the way to Bailey Hawkins' ranch."

Jace expelled his breath slowly. He stared up the street a long moment, without answering.

"I think Bailey is ready to make his play," Steve Humbolt said quietly. "He's been building up to it for a long time."

Jace nodded. "If you've figured Bailey out right—my place'll be his first move," he agreed quietly.

"Jace, I'm asking you again—will you pin on a deputy's badge?"

The muscles bunched hard along the ridge of Jace Malloy's jaw. He climbed onto the wagon seat and lifted the reins. "The answer's the same, Steve. I'm through with guns."

He tried to sort his jumbled thoughts as the buckboard rattled out of town, but for once they wouldn't line up properly. Sling Wicker had brought back more of the past than he liked to remember. Slim tied up with Bailey Hawkins. . . .

Two miles out of town, he was jerked out of his reverie by the appearance of a horse and rider. There was only one man who sat his saddle in that arrogant manner—Bailey Hawkins.

Everything about Hawkins was big. His Wineglass ranch was the biggest in the basin; he maintained the biggest crew of riders. The horse he rode was a giant gelding. Other men would have looked dwarfed on such a horse, but Bailey's big body matched his mount.

And now he pulled the gelding to a halt in the middle of the road, blocking the right of way.

"Was over at your place looking for you this morning," Bailey Hawkins said without preamble. He maneuvered the gelding alongside the wagon. His black eyes fastened on Jace with arrogant confidence. "Thought I'd ride to meet you—since you weren't home."

Jace waited for the rest of it—there would be more. Bailey Hawkins wasn't seeking a neighborly visit. It came abruptly; like the sharp slap of a pistol shot.

"I told my crew to start fencing Indian Springs," he stated flatly.

The muscles tightened in Jace's stomach. Steve, then, had been right. Bailey Hawkins was starting his range grab. He'd grown too big for the Wineglass; he wanted the whole range. And the way he planned to get it was take over all the water.

"I own Indian Springs," Jace said softly.

"That's what I wanted to see you about," the Wineglass owner snapped coldly. "I'm buying the Springs. My crew'll be starting on it day after tomorrow."

"And suppose I don't want to sell," Jace said slowly.

Bailey Hawkins' lip curled in a cold smile. "Don't reckon I'm giving you much choice." Contempt lay heavy in his voice. He fished in his shirt pocket and brought out a thick roll of bills. Casually, he tossed it into the wagon.

"There's your money," he said. "You'll find it's a fair price. And here's a bill of sale. Sign it."

Jace came to his feet, and the buckboard groaned in protest as he leaped. Bailey Hawkins' mouth opened for a surprised curse; he tried to twist away from Malloy and reach his gun at the same time. But there was no time. The full weight of Jace's hundred and eighty-five pounds hit him solid.

The horse snorted and bolted. Bailey Hawkins tried to keep his seat, but Malloy was dragging at him. The gelding buck-jumped once, and the two men hit the ground with a body-jarring thud.

Hawkins rolled to his feet, his gun clearing leather, but he never got a chance to use it. Jace Malloy drove into him with the force of a pile-driver. The gun sailed away in the dust. Hawkins snarled and swung.

Jace took the blow, a stinging roundhouse to the side of the head. It didn't stop him. All he could see was Hawkins' face through a red haze and it was all he needed to see. He could feel his fists land and could see the marks and welts show up on the other's face.

Hawkins tried to get away at last, but he never got the chance. Jace pursued him relentlessly and each shock, as he sent his fists

pounding into Hawkins' body, was like cooling salve on a ragged wound. Each time blood spurted from the rancher, it seemed to wash away some of the jeers and taunts Jace had endured from Hawkins these two years. The fury of his attack never weakened.

Then Hawkins broke and ran, stumbling blindly through the sagebrush. That surprised Jace so that he stood there, mouth open, staring after the rancher. In that moment of hesitation, Hawkins got a big lead.

Before Jace came out of his trance, the rancher was in the saddle and galloping straight for him.

Jace got himself behind the buckboard, when he saw Hawkins' intention was to ride him down and Hawkins hauled the gelding to a stop. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

"You'll regret this till the day you die, Malloy," he said. There was no bluster in his voice, just cold, icy hatred.

"We'll see," Jace said, between gulps of fresh air.

"You're damned right we will!" Hawkins ground out. He lifted his quirt and lashed it across the rumps of Jace's bays. The startled team squealed and galloped off, the buckboard rattling and bouncing behind them. Hawkins dug spurs into the gelding once more—then found himself staring into the muzzle of his own gun. He reined up.

Jace said tightly, "Ride."

He watched the cattleman ride out of sight in the direction of town, then tossed the gun away. He stared in the direction of his run-aways, then cursed softly. The bays were still going strong, a cloud of dust boiling up behind them.

It was seven miles to his little spread, The Bent J, and only two miles back to town. He could borrow a horse in town.

H E'D hoped to attract no attention in town, but simply slip into the livery, get a mount and leave again. But it didn't work out that way. He was crossing the street to the livery—in another moment he would have been out of sight—when a voice hailed him.

"Hey, Malloy!" Jace recognized Sling Wicker's sarcastic tones. He turned. Sling was swaggering toward him, his hat shoved back on his head, and his thumbs hooked in his belt. Jace was aware that a number of people had stopped and were watching.

"I been looking for you, Jace Malloy," Sling said, in a voice that was louder than necessary. "You shot my partner in the back—and I swore I'd get you for it. The law badge pertected you, but you ain't wearing one now."

"Your partner was looking at me when he

was shot," Jace said quietly. "And I'm not heeled."

"Why not?" Sling jeered. "Afraid you might meet somebody a little faster than you was?"

"I've my own reasons for not wearing a gun," Jace said, and turned to leave.

"You're a dirty, yaller coward—" Sling started, and broke off abruptly as Jace wheeled and rushed him. The little gunman flipped a gun out; and its cold muzzle jammed into Jace's stomach and stopped him.

"You ain't doing the same to me that you done to my boss, Bailey Hawkins," Sling said very softly. Then he lifted his voice so the onlookers could hear. "Next time you're in town, Malloy, wear a gun! Or don't come to town any more!"

Jace turned his back on Sling then and started for the livery. And Bailey Hawkins cut across his path. The rancher had washed the blood from his face, but the marks Jace had put there was still plenty plain.

"So you did hire Sling, eh, Hawkins?" Jace said.

Hawkins nodded, a queer smile on his face. "I'd hoped, when I saw you walking—that you'd brought my gun with you."

"You guessed wrong," Jace said. "I don't wear guns."

"Good enough for me," Hawkins said. "A man can't hold to what he's got in this country, unless he fights for it."

"And he can also lose what he's fighting for the same way," Malloy said.

Hawkins smiled. "We'll see. My crew will still fence in Indian Springs—right on schedule."

Jace walked on to the livery and got a mount. He was sticking his foot in the stirrup, when a light footstep made him turn. It was Elsie Humbolt, and the puzzled, hurt look in her eyes brought a twinge of pain to Jace.

"I don't guess I'll be seeing you for a few days?"

"That's right."

"Jace—I don't understand. The whole town saw what happened—"

"I've put on shows for towns before," Jace said harshly. "Quite some shows, too—" He shrugged. "Got tired of the act, though, and changed my routine." He swung into the saddle. "Be seeing you—in a few days."

He was cooking supper that night when a rider pulled up at the corral. It was Steve Humbolt. The young lawman came in and slumped in a chair.

"Has Bailey Hawkins started fencing Indian Springs yet?" he demanded without preamble.

Jace shook his head. "I rode past the Springs today. There were a few fence posts his crew had brought over. I burned 'em."

"The whole town knows what happened between you and Hawkins today—and the reason," Steve went on.

Jace nodded. "The money's still in the buckboard, I reckon. I didn't count it—but it wasn't much."

"What are you going to do now?" the sheriff asked.

Jace grinned mirthlessly. "Nothing."

"Damn!" the sheriff swore softly. "You're laying yourself wide open to a bushwhack bullet—you oughta know that better than anybody, Jace!"

Jace filled two plates with beans and sat down. "The toughest gunslinger alive, Steve, hesitates on throwing down on an unarmed man. That's murder—and murder means a lynch rope. Hawkins wants me to dig out a gun and start shooting—but if I did, I'd be playing his game. This way, he's playing mine."

"Wish I thought you were right," Steve said worriedly. "Bailey Hawkins has started grabbing range. And now that he's started, I'm thinking nothing short of boothill will stop him."

In spite of Steve's fears, Jace went about his chores as usual that night, and kept his light burning until bedtime. Nothing happened, and he turned in early for a good night's sleep.

It wasn't until the next morning that he saw the damage.

HE WAS going to the well after water, when he happened to glance toward his lower eighty.

Where last night had stood a haystack, was now only a blackened spot of ashes and desolation. He set the bucket down, saddled a horse and rode down to inspect the damage. He was looking for signs around the stack, when Steve Humbolt rode up.

"A neighbor rode by this morning and saw it," he said shortly. He paused a moment, then burst out bitterly. "So Bailey Hawkins is playing your game, huh? Looks to me like you're losing a lot of chips, to be holding a winning hand."

Jace's lips were grim as he spoke. "All right, Steve, so Hawkins won this hand. But it's the man who rakes in the last pot that wins."

"You can't afford to lose many more pots like that."

"No," Jace answered thoughtfully. "I can't." He squatted on his heels and rolled a smoke. For a few minutes he puffed thoughtfully, then he said, "I licked Hawkins in a fist fight yesterday—although he's a bigger man than me. I did it 'cause I never gave him a chance to get his balance—he was off-balance the whole time. I figure he's still that way—it's

sure he hasn't figured out my hand. Give me till tomorrow, Steve—then we'll do it your way."

The younger man agreed reluctantly and returned to town. Jace finished up his morning chores, but he didn't do any work after that. He just got out an old blacksnake whip, and spent the day idly popping the whip at tin cans and other small targets. Then he slept, waking at dusk.

As the night deepened, he blew out the lamp and slipped outside. He'd put on dark clothes to make himself harder to see, and he carried the blacksnake whip. Near the barn was the jumbled wreckage of an old windmill that the former owner of the ranch had bought. The shadows around the wreckage were black and deep. Jace took his station there and settled himself for a long vigil.

The hours dragged by slowly and painfully. The chill night air seeped through his clothes and made his joints stiff, and he longed for the comfort of tobacco.

It was well past midnight, and toward morning when the first sound reached his ears. While they were still faint in the distance, he stretched and rubbed the stiffness from his limbs. The sounds drew near; still faint, but unmistakably the soft sounds of creaking leather, and horses' hoofs on the earth. Fifty yards away, in a clump of brush, the horses stopped and faint whispers reached his ears.

Moments later, dark forms loomed out of the darkness, moving toward the barn. He strained through the darkness and made out three figures. One holding the horses, he thought, would make four.

Two of the figures moved around the barn to a point where they could watch the house. The third stayed near the barn. Jace waited tensely, and then his ears caught the sound he'd been waiting for—a faint gurgling. A moment later, there was a strong smell of kerosene. He moved forward on the balls of his feet.

A match burst into flame. The blacksnake whip writhed and whistled through the air. It popped like a pistol shot. The match went out—and a man cursed in surprise and pain. Jace's arm drew back again, and the whip whistled once more.

This time there was a roar of pain from the man by the barn. Startled mutterings of warning came from the other two men, but the man by the barn was whimpering and half-crazed with pain. His gun roared.

Jace flung the whip again at the flash. The man screamed in pain, and Jace heard the gun hit the ground. The other two men were racing around the barn now. Jace knew that seconds counted. With deadly fury, he laid the whip on the man beside the barn. The man screamed again and searched frantically

for his fallen weapon. Jace lashed out again.

"He's killing me!" the man yelled and leaped to his feet, running toward the horses.

The next few moments were years of confused gunfire, screams of pain, and the sickening pop and lash of a blacksnake whip. Jace struck at the two men who'd raced up—aiming chest high, and knowing by their squawls that he was connecting.

First one, then the other broke under the terrible punishment and ran toward the horses. Jace pursued them, and never for an instant was the terrible whip out of action. The man who'd held the horses flung two confused shots at Jace, before Jace lashed at him. The whip hit man and horse, and the horse bucked. The man hit the ground and squalling like a catamount, hauled himself up behind one of the other men.

The intruders raced away into the darkness, and Jace turned back to the barn. He kept his vigil the rest of the night, but there was no more action.

With the coming of daylight, he searched the battlefield. Alongside the barn was a can of kerosene and some matches.

"Plenty evidence," he chuckled, then grinned as he picked up a gun. Cut in the wooden handle was the name, Joe Davis. Jace nodded with satisfaction. Joe Davis had been on Bailey Hawkins' payroll for over a year.

He walked toward the spot where the horses had been left, and halfway there, he stopped. There was blood on the ground, and a piece of Levi overalls.

"That gent won't be sitting a saddle for a while," he thought, and laughed at the thought of presenting such evidence in court. There was a hat where the horses had been kept. The name of one Sam Gray was punched in the band.

Evidence that two of Bailey Hawkins' riders were on my place last night—and the can and matches, Jace thought happily. I got a hunch Joe Davis and Sam Gray will do plenty of talking—when they're in court with a pen sentence staring 'em in the face.

HE ATE a big breakfast, loaded his evidence in the buckboard and went to town. The livery horse was tied on the back of the buckboard.

He'd won again, he thought, as the buckboard rattled along. A cold sweat bathed his forehead, as he thought how close he'd been to gunfighting. He wondered grimly how long it would be before men would forget that he'd been Jace Malloy, gunslinging sheriff, and know him only as Jace Malloy, rancher.

True, Sling Wicker was still on Bailey Hawkins' payroll, and was probably still around town; but with the evidence in the

back of the wagon, Jace had a strong hunch Hawkins was through, and that Sling would be drifting along in a few days.

And so another episode had ended, and he had not been forced to resort to gunsmoke. Maybe, he thought, maybe he could convince Elsie that he was right, that gunfighting got a man nowhere—but a lot of bad memories and an early grave.

He guided the buckboard smartly down Stampede's main street, and pulled up in a cloud of dust at the livery stable, thinking first to return the livery's horse, then go to the sheriff's office. He was coming out of the livery stable when he almost walked into Elsie Humbolt.

"Elsie!" He grinned and doffed his hat. Then his smile faded. "What's wrong?" he asked quickly. "Has something happened to Steve?"

"Not yet." Her lips were tight to control their quivering.

His grip tightened on her arm. "Tell me!" It was a command.

"I think you should know," she said tartly. "There was a lot of ugly talk around town yesterday—about who burned down your haystack. Jed Parker had a couple too many drinks and openly accused Bailey Hawkins."

Jace's mouth was getting dry, as his mind was leaping ahead to the conclusion of her story. Jed Parker owned a small spread near Jace's.

"Sling Wicker took up the argument for Hawkins, of course, and Jed went for his gun."

The blood was pounding in Jace's temples. "Did Jed die?" he asked.

The girl shook her head. "Badly wounded. Steve arrested Sling, but Hawkins' lawyer demanded a hearing, and proved that Sling shot in self-defense."

Jace nodded to himself. Sling could give a man like Jed a full second start, then beat him to the first shot.

The girl's voice was dull with despair. "But some of the townspeople called on Steve and told him he'd have to run Sling out of town. So Steve gave Sling his walking papers—by sundown today."

"And."

"Sling's not going."

Jace didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. A sheriff had given a killer orders to leave town—and if the killer didn't leave, it meant— His lips twisted bitterly and he could see it as though it had happened yesterday, instead of being still to come.

Jace drew a long breath. Steve was a good sheriff; a good man with a gun. But Steve wasn't in the top category as far as gunslinging was concerned. He wasn't a killer. Sling Wicker was.

Slowly Jace Malloy climbed back on his buckboard and turned his team out of town.

THE ride home was like a funeral march to Jace. He hadn't gone by to see Steve after what Elsie had told him. It would have been a joke, now, for him to have brought out his puny little evidence of Bailey Hawkins' conniving.

Bailey Hawkins had outsmarted him. He'd brought this thing to a head in a way that permitted no backing out; in a way that would leave Bailey Hawkins holding all the trumps. With the law gone in Stampede, Hawkins would have clear sailing for a couple of weeks at least, before outside law could be brought in, or the citizens get a sheriff into office that they could trust.

And a couple of weeks would be all that Bailey Hawkins would need.

Arriving home, he unhitched the bays and turned them loose in the pasture. It was meal time, but he wasn't hungry. He sat on the front steps and stared out across his range; across the land to the spot blackened by the burning haystack, to the slight rise in the ground that hid Indian Wells from view.

This was the culmination of his dreams. This was what he'd worked for all the years he'd worn a law badge. He'd taken up sheriffing to get enough money for a spread of his own. And when he'd gotten enough, he'd quit.

"They'll never let you hang up your guns," they'd told him. *"There'll be men with grudges to settle—men who'll want to see if they can't shoot you down; so they can brag about it."*

Well, for two years he'd proved these prophets wrong. Maybe if it hadn't been for the memory of that last fight—the memory of the revulsion that had swept over him—he wouldn't have lasted two years.

He didn't know and it didn't make any difference now. Because he was face to face with something he couldn't dodge. This wasn't like the other times. This time, if he didn't fight, somebody was going to get hurt. And it wasn't going to be him. That was the hell of it.

The sun was well past its zenith when he got up. He went inside and dragged a small trunk from under his bunk. From the bottom of the trunk, he drew a gunbelt with two holsters.

He strapped the belt around his middle and touched the two big bone handles that jutted from the holsters. After all these months, they still felt familiar. He slid out first one gun and then the other and checked them carefully. They'd been well oiled when he put them away; their mechanism was still perfect.

He went to the corral and caught his saddle horse, and a few moments later, he was raising dust toward town.

He was almost to Stampede before the question that had been trying to force its way into his mind, refused to be denied an answer any longer.

The last time he'd fought a man, he'd almost been killed. And it had been because at the moment of drawing, something had slowed his hand. Had it been fear? He tried to remember those long ago emotions. He didn't think it was fear, but how could a man be sure? Maybe it had been merely reluctance to take another life?

So what, he argued to himself dryly. No matter what it had been, the hesitation—the reluctance had been there. Wild shooting on the other man's part had saved his life. Would the reluctance be there this time? Sling Wicker didn't miss the first shot—that was for sure.

He felt his forehead and found it damp. But it was a hot day; anybody's liable to sweat on a hot day. He held his hand out, watching to see if it were steady, but the jogging of the horse made it hard to tell.

Stampede had that curious quietness that held a town in its grip when violence was building up. The feeling brought a flood of old memories crowding his mind. There were practically no horses on the street and almost no one in sight, but he knew that the town was actually packed with people.

He gave no sign of knowing it, however, as he rode to the Peacock Saloon and tethered his horse outside. He caught a glimpse of faces staring out of windows as he crossed the sidewalk and shoved through the batwing doors.

The Peacock Saloon was packed tight with men—and was as quiet as a tomb. He grinned. They'd seen him coming. Sling Wicker and Bailey Hawkins were against the bar, untouched drinks nearby. He stopped a few feet away.

"Sling, couple days ago you were yelling for a shootout with me, account I shot your owlhoot partner. I did plug him. He was a no-good yaller coyote that had earned a slug in the brisket—same as you."

He heard the swift intake of many breaths—saw killing rage whiten Sling's face, and saw Bailey Hawkins lay a restraining hand on Sling's arm. He saw Bailey Hawkins' expression; it was that of a man who'd just laid down three kinds—only to have someone else lay down three aces.

"I'll be out in the street, Sling," Jace went on casually. "Let's see if you got the guts to come out and collect what you was hollerin' for."

He turned his back deliberately then and strolled out. As he passed through the batwings, he heard Sling's raging profanity and Bailey Hawkins' persuading voice, as he tried

to talk the gunman out of the fight. He grinned. He'd trumped Hawkins' ace with the top hand in the deck—the best possible hand remaining.

He strolled up the street, then crossed over and leaned against one of the pillars of the hotel porch. He wiped the sweat from the palms of his hands, and tried to untie the knot in his stomach. The knot tightened, however, as the doors of the Peacock suddenly flapped open.

Sling stepped outside, his scrawny hands brushing easily past his gun butts. His walk was confident and arrogant as he stepped into the street and started walking. Jace stepped out into the open.

Sling's teeth were bared in a grin. "I seen your last fight, Malloy," he called. "You was slow—shower'n hell. Yore nerve was gone, Malloy, and you know it—that's why you took your guns off."

"Might be," Jace said evenly. Curiously, he found himself smiling. The question had perplexed him more than he'd cared to admit—it would be good to find the answer now.

Sling could not get him talking—a favorite trick to draw away attention—and now Sling made his play. He was fast—faster than anybody Jace had ever seen.

Jace was surprised at the roar of his own gun; was surprised when he saw Sling jerk and stumble, with his gun still unfired. Jace thumbed the hammer back, in case another shot was necessary.

It wasn't.

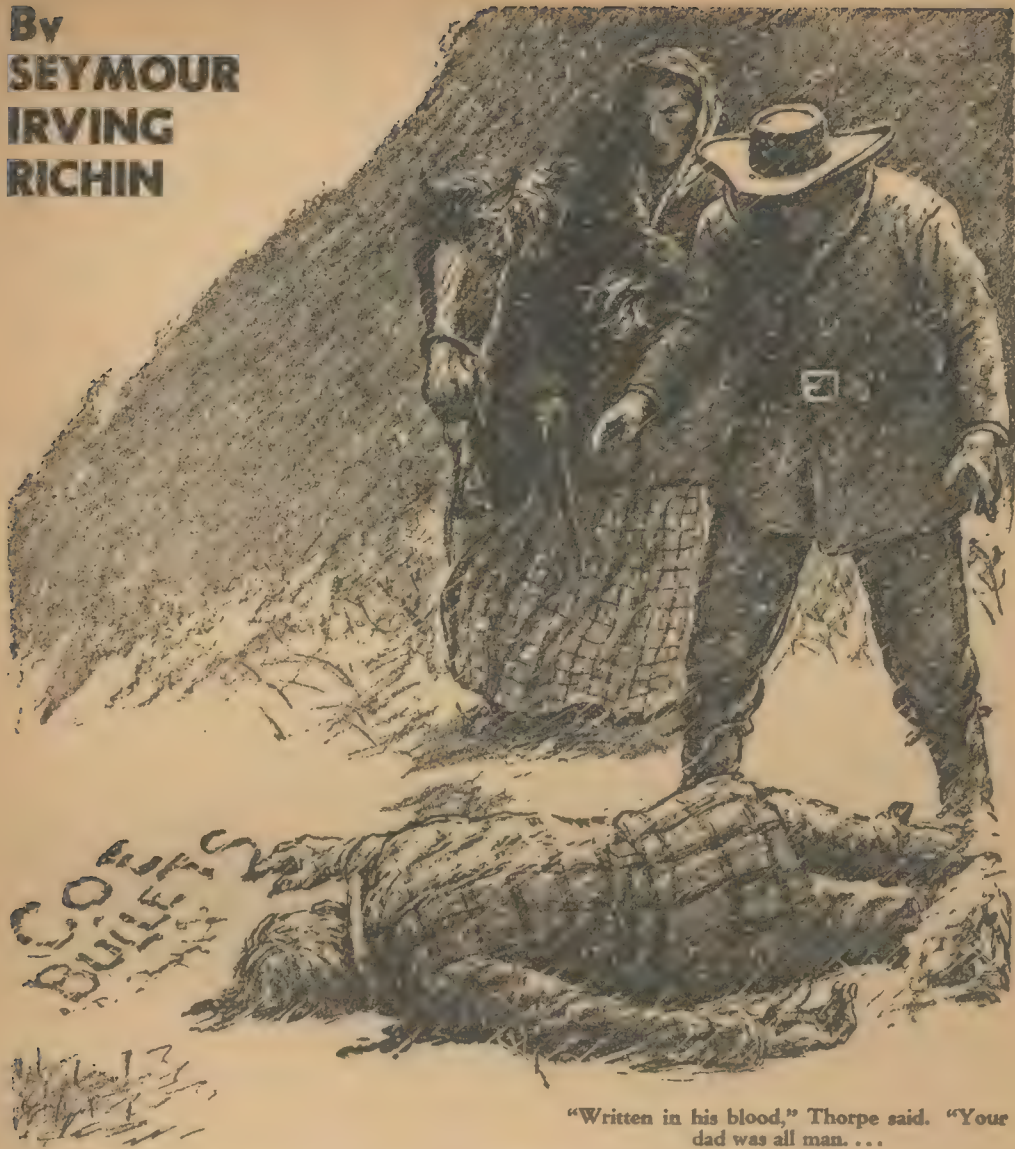
JACE AND ELSIE were sitting on the Humbolt's front porch. Darkness was settling over Stampede when Steve turned in the gate. The sheriff pushed his hat on the back of his head and slowly sat down on the steps.

"Bailey Hawkins pulled out—sold the Wineglass to the bank at a low figure and sloped." The sheriff was silent a moment. "Why'd you do it, Jace? Only yesterday, I heard from Sling about your last fight—about how you'd fumbled and only the other fellow's bad shooting had saved you. Hell, a man can't help it if his nerves play tricks on him. So why'd you do it?"

Jace squeezed Elsie's hand. "My nerve never broke," he said quietly, "but I never knew it until today. That last fight—it wasn't nerves that made me slow. It was just that I wasn't fighting for anything—the hombre was just a glory hunter wanting a fight." He paused.

"Bailey Hawkins was right and didn't know it," he added. "In this country a man's got to fight for what he wants—and that's all I did."

By
**SEYMOUR
IRVING
RICHIN**



"Written in his blood," Thorpe said. "Your dad was all man. . . ."

Drifters Die Young

To Russ Thorpe home was something to ride away from and a girl something to forget, and a man took his silver where he found it—silver, or an unmarked grave!

JEFF FARR was dying. His rough miner's jacket was sprayed with red where Coc's knife-toughs had stabbed their daggers deep. Yet the worst of his hurt was elsewhere.

One slash had hooked him open from his right shoulder across his left chest, severing his rosary. The crucifix was gone. The burly, red-bearded oldster regretted that deeply,

above his agony. It was wrong that a man as Christian as he should die without the feel of his God near him.

He winced. The night was blind with snow. Flaky waves churned in the wind, flowed down under the stormy Washoe sky. They lashed him like whips. He gritted his teeth. He drove his big paint horse doggedly ahead.

A scream was in him, in his slitted eyes, in his sucked-in cheeks, in the lax movements of his mouth. But he did not scream. Jeff Farr was not a man for screaming. A tough, devout, law-loving placer-miner whose cabin and provision boxes had always been open for a man with hunger in his belly, he was as hardy as he was generous.

He clung to the back of his paint, eyes searching the foamy wind for the outline of his cabin. His lips thinned suddenly. A harsh sound came out of him.

In the distance a splash of amber light came alive in the white night. Outlined in his cabin-window illumination, he saw the blurry shadows of his daughter and Russ Thorpe.

Farr was remotely amazed that he was smiling. With his last strength he booted the big paint forward, faster. But the drag of death was in him and he slipped in the saddle. He caught the horn and clung. He tried to forget the feel of his blood flowing. He tried to forget his deadly weakness. He had a task to do. He had to get home. He had to die in peace. He had to pass on to others the names of his murderers.

A numbness seized him. He clasped his hands around the saddle horn and prayed. He booted the big paint forward, glassy eyes fixed upon the amber splash of light.

"**D**ID you hear anything out there, Russ?"

Anne Farr whirled from the black, iron stove, circled the long tom against the cabin wall and rushed to the window. She peered into the slanting wall of snow, anxiety in the tenseness of her slim, shapely body. She turned, frowning.

"There's nothing, now. But I could have sworn I heard a horse nickering."

"Could you?" Russ Thorpe lifted himself on one arm from a corner cot, then flung off the blanket with both hands. They were extraordinary, his big-boned hands. Trail-bronzed and heavily scarred, they were hands that knew well the feel of Colt and Bowie steel, and could lash out destructively when fists flew, if the need were there. He was tall, about twenty-six. His shoulders were broad, his hair jet and curly, his face clean-cut, despite the strain of his late illness. But his eyes were sad.

"You're hearing the wind," he said, after listening intently.

"I'm worried about dad. He's late and in such trouble. And out alone in that awful cold. Are you sure it's only the wind?"

At the mention of trouble Thorpe touched two fingertips to his jaw and narrowed one eye. Then he let his hand fall. Again he listened intently. "Sure I'm sure," he said at length. "Mebbe you heard somethin' before. But not now. Only the wind."

He relaxed back on the cot. He said nothing more though he felt her fear in the air. He built himself a quirly, touched flame to the tip and smoked silently. Out of the corner of his eye he studied her. She was standing, motionless, at the window again, staring out. Her lips were drawn tight.

Thorpe sighed. He called himself a fool for what he was about to do. Always he had given the trouble of others a wide berth. He had seen too many men look for trouble—and find more than they had expected—to glorify such foolishness with the name of bravery.

But this is different, he tried to tell himself.

He swore softly and Anne turned, her thick auburn hair swaying around her face. The lantern threw tiny, leaping pools of gleam on it.

"What's that you said, Russ?"

Watching her, he needed a deeper breath, suddenly, to speak.

Then he said, "Nothing," and frowned. He glanced at his ivory-handled Navy Colt and ammunition belt, suspended from a wall peg. He ground out the quirly embers on the floor with a booted toe.

He got up wearily. "Trouble," he murmured, disgusted, and reached for his gun-belt.

She approached him as he buckled the strap and tested the holster.

She said, "Three weeks must be a record for a drifter in one town. Much less one home."

He winced. Her flippancy hurt him and the sadness in his eyes deepened. She had been that way all along, from the moment she'd started nursing him back to health after Jeff Farr had pulled him out of an arroyo, unconscious and half dead from starvation, with his dead horse pinning him down.

He said wrathfully, "I turned saddle tramp because my heel itched. Listen to me—I wouldn't talk of this, but I gotta tell you. I feel I got to. Under your roof I learned why I was really on the move."

"Why?"

"Because I never had a home."

He wondered if a girl whose life had been as sheltered as hers could understand that. A horse's death-fall had catapulted him into the first home he'd ever known in his life.

The Farrs' family love had touched him. The feel and depth of home had reached him here as nowhere else, and he'd learned he was a lonely man.

"I'm sorry I spoke the way I did," the girl said quietly. Sympathy was deep in her and she might have said more, but the loud, unmistakable neighing of a horse broke her off. For a split second they stared at each other. Then Thorpe whirled to the window.

"Out there—see!" He pointed. The big paint was pounding through the snow-waves, on a line with the cabin, its mane flying in the wind. Both of them saw the empty saddle simultaneously.

"Mother of God," Anne whispered. "Something's happened to him—"

"Stay here. I'll be back fast as I can." Thorpe whipped a heavy miner's jacket from a wall-peg, twisted into it and swung open the door. A squall of snow billowed in stinging. He grimaced when he saw she was right behind him. She'd seized old Jeff's Winchester and thrown a coat about her shoulders. Her face was white.

"In the Washoe," he warned, "trouble and a riderless horse don't spell good news. You better stay."

"In the Washoe only a fool doesn't meet trouble. We're wasting time," she said.

At that, Thorpe took the storm squarely and ran to the paint. He heard her follow stumblingly. The wind cut at them fiercely. The paint pranced and nickered as Thorpe reached for the dangling ribbons, scanning the land for Farr. The paint eluded him, neighed shrilly and headed away.

Thorpe's big hands clenched. He knew what that meant. He'd seen old Jeff demonstrate this trick he had taught his horse. He was right. In minutes, the paint led them to the dead man in the snow.

"MURDERED."

Anger touched Thorpe's blood with its heat. He stared down at Farr's mutilated body. Dead men were no new sight to him but this again was different. It was more than his own loyalty for the man who had befriended him. This deeply religious man had deserved to die in peace. This man should not have been gut-ripped into the ground.

He glanced at Anne. Lines of pain were on her white face. Her breath steamed in the wind in straight, fast jets. The jets of steam came faster. He wished she would quit staring at her father's blood like that.

"My heart told me," Anne said and didn't finish. The jets of steam on her lips halted, then began more rapidly. She moved past the body where there was crimson on the snow. She slanted the Winchester at it.

Thorpe moved over fast. Scrawled in red on the snow were the letters C-O-E. And directly below, the word: "Bullets."

"Written in his blood," Thorpe said. "Your dad was all man." He got down carefully on his hands and knees and scrutinized the bloody lettering. He arose, frowning. "You spoke of trouble before. Would Coe mean the same to you?"

"There was bad blood between Bible Ben Coe and my dad. Yes."

Thorpe licked his thin lips. "Who's this Coe?"

"A Virginia City gambler. He runs the Lucky Time Saloon." Then, "But you don't have to take up for us. Our trouble is our own."

Thorpe said swiftly, almost harshly, "You say a lot you get sorry for, I reckon."

She glanced directly at his eyes, surprised at his violence. Then her heart eased, knowing suddenly more about him than she had before. She realized that he had become as irrevocably joined to this issue as she. And, remembering the interest behind his candor in the cabin, she was doubly glad.

"Coe was the only enemy dad ever had in his life," she told him. "I don't know why. All I know is bad blood came between them after the Piutes attacked the Comstock. Dad wouldn't tell me more. He said it was bad enough one Farr had locked horns with a devil like Coe."

Thorpe considered that thoughtfully. His frown stayed. "That mean anything to you?" He waved a thumb at the lettering. "Bullets?"

She shook her head and said thinly, "Queer—bullets. No, not a thing." Then she decided to do something that had been on her mind. She handed him her Winchester, turned abruptly and headed for the cabin.

Thorpe stared at the crimson lettering, then moved to the big paint, propped the Winchester in Farr's gear and came back, still frowning.

Then he noticed Farr's right hand was tightly clenched. He pried the fist open. The severed rosary sank into the snow.

Thorpe swore softly and returned it to the hand. *Damn them for that!* He stood up and glanced from the body to the lettering and back again. *Bullets.* He shook his head.

She was back soon. She passed him the shovel and moved steadily to her father's body with the blanket.

She said, "He was a man who lived alone. Away from crowds—think he'd rather stay here."

Thorpe gently helped her roll the body into the blanket. She was more collected than he would have thought possible. He thought of ravenous wolves tearing the earth, and searched hard for a suitable place for a grave.

Near a white skeleton of pinon grove he drove the shovel into the crusted snow.

Overhead, dark-massed clouds obscured the snow-waves. The shovel stroked rhythmically in his hands, like a pendulum swinging. He did not see the gleam of the snow, or the darkly flying earth casting its shadow on the mountain whiteness. Nor did he think of his severe muscle strain. He thought of her.

She stood behind him, saying nothing, but her presence touched him sharply. His throat got tight. He wanted to tell her that he would have given his life to make this task unnecessary. Then he knew silence was better. There were no words for this.

At last it was over. The blanketed body was gone into the earth and the rude rock cairn that Thorpe had built marked the grave. The wind had diminished. Both of them were watching the rock cairn turn snow white.

"He was a good man." Thorpe found it natural to put his arm about her shoulders. He was aware of the softness of her and reproved himself for such a feeling at such a time but he couldn't help it. "That's a lot to remember. Even now."

"Yes, it is. It is." Her eyes widened in alarm as he moved abruptly to the prancing paint. "Russ—"

"Yeah?" He turned. He was profoundly pleased at the warmth in her tone. He liked the way she said his name all right, he thought.

"I know how you feel, Russ. I feel the same way. Worse. But Coe's bad and smart. Don't do anything wild."

"I'm goin' to kill him any way I know how," Thorpe said simply.

The concern on her face made his heart leap. "But you don't know Coe, Russ. He doesn't fight, he *murders*."

Thorpe's breath steamed out in a long gust and he watched the wind blow it away. "So that's the way she's stacked? That snake rods the law?"

"Oh, there's law in Virginia City. But when a man dies in a riot it's hard to pick out the murderer—"

"A riot," Thorpe said. "I see."

"Every man who's locked horns with Coe seems to die that way. The lawmen suspect him, but they can't get proof. He's got his backers, and his killers use knives. Nobody sees them or hears them."

Thorpe caught the ribbons, climbed into leather.

"Russ." She stayed him with a quick hand on the saddle. "God be with you and I pray you'll come home again."

Home. The word was warm and shiny in his mind. He glanced at the lantern light in the cabin window.

"I'll try," he said. He wanted to say more.

He wanted to answer openly the invitation in her eyes. But beyond her, the snow-filmed rock-cairn caught his eyes. He repeated, "I'll come home again," and to himself he finished the thought, *or die trying*.

THE smell of tea, spice, orange peel and the sweet, sickening odor of red poppies was heavy in the air as Thorpe racked the paint past Virginia City's Chinese quarter, heading for Coe's Lucky Time Saloon. Laughter reverberated along C Street from the *bier-kellers*, blending with the gay singing of the French dance hall girls in the Cafe-de-Paris.

Here and there lantern light stained windows with yellow and the muddy, crooked road shone with it. The hooves of the paint beat through the patches of light, churning snow and mud. Thorpe cursed out a bull-whacker whose whip had snaked too close, wheeled the paint and let the pack train rumble ahead with its load of machinery for the mines and stamp mills.

He went taut in the saddle. Through the film of snow he saw a long, spidery-lean man put cold eyes on him. Thorpe flicked a glance at the sign, distinguishing the words LUCKY TIME with thinning lips.

Thorpe angled the paint over.

The man didn't wait for him to speak. An unnaturally large vein throbbed on his bony temple. "Where'd you get that paint?"

Thorpe dismounted. He carefully took in the spidery man's sagging belt, heavy with bowie knife and guns. "A dead man gave it to me," he drawled. "It ain't true what they say about dead men. Some dead men talk."

The spidery man wiped snow from his chin and kept his hand thoughtfully there. He said flatly: "I don't know what you're blowin' about. But I know what I'd do if I were you. If you want to live, get on that damned paint and dust."

Thorpe felt his anger rising against the wall of the other's hatred, but he said quietly, "Funny, what dead men say. You find them stabbed and they talk about bullets—"

The cold eyes glittered. The man's hand flashed out, clawing, from his chin on a line with Thorpe's throat. He twisted Thorpe's shirt into a knot and yanked him forward in one fluid motion.

His raging voice said, "I said, start makin' dust."

The other's action had taken Thorpe by surprise, but he recovered his balance instantly. He caught the spidery wrist and twisted hard, within an ace of snapping the bone. The man lost his grip and his mouth gaped open like a hooked fish. His scream cut into Thorpe's hearing and Thorpe hooked a big fist upward at the mouth. He felt the blow

land with his back muscles and the scream snapped off.

Blood blurred the spidery man's lips and he stood there, shuddering, swaying like a wheat stalk. He caught himself. His right hand sank within an inch of his gun butt and froze. He glared at Thorpe's leveled Colt. His hands stayed empty. Without a word he spun around and thrust rapidly through the batwings.

Thorpe followed, after tying the paint down under a protective lean-to.

The spidery man was nowhere to be seen in the Lucky Time. Through the smoke haze of burning tobacco, willow bark and *kin-nikinnick* Thorpe scanned the poker tables and 'faro layouts without success. He considered the room, his mind alert to the prospect of danger. An iron-braced kerosene lamp shed wan light upon the gambling crowd. Along one wall stood a row of whiskey barrels and directly beyond them, a staircase.

Thorpe brushed away a clinging Mex dance girl and took a shot of Taos lightnin' at the bar to burn his anger away.

"See a tall, thin fella bust in here just before?" he asked the bartender. "Skinny as hell from his head down. Got a big vein stickin' off his temple."

"You mean Spider Garrick," the bartender answered amiably. His scraggly, longhorn mustache didn't quite hide his sparse, yellow teeth. "Sure I seen him. He just dusted in here like a fire wuz chasin' him. Ran up to Coe's room." The barkeep pointed to a door on the first staircase landing. A strip of light lay on the floor, knifing out from under it. "Coe oughtta be down any minute with Garrick and Moore. Heard any news about that ruckus at Six Mile?"

"Ruckus?" The long fingers of both Thorpe's hands coiled, then relaxed.

The bartender grinned. "Six men beefed. And four other miners got wounded bad. Doc says they're so close to hell they can smell the smoke."

"How'd it start?"

"Garrick and Moore told me Jeff Farr was to blame. You know him?"

"Some. Garrick and Moore were in the ruckus, eh?"

MIKE poured himself a whiskey slug, split his moustache carefully upward with two fingers and let the juice warm him. He shuddered with pleasure. "Ahh." Then, "Reckon Coe's boys was there. Queer, Farr goin' loco like that. He's a right smart jasper. Know what he done when the Piutes attacked the Comstock last week?"

Thorpe sent a quick glance at Coe's door. Inside, someone had jarred heavily against the panel. "What he do?"

"Saved the Washoe, that's what. Came out-

ta the hills to Six Mile when he spotted the Piute war smoke on the buttes. The boys was low on ammunition and scared bad. More'n a few sneaked off over the Sierra 'steada waitin' for Downieville to send reinforcements. Farr found out the Wells Fargo office was loaded with silver bullion from the Ophir and Gould and Curry mines. He got the boys ammunition all right and the Piutes were licked then and there. Farr talked them bigwigs into meltin' the bullion down into silver bullets!"

"Bullets!" Thorpe said and hammered his knotted fist on the bar. The bartender threw him a quick glance and then, suddenly silent, moved away.

Thorpe hardly noticed; he was putting it together in his mind, piece by piece, like ammunition in a gunbelt. Farr must have caught Coe pulling a sandy with the silver bullets during the Indian attack. And he'd paid for it with his life. At the thought, Thorpe remembered Anne's suffering and the memory was like a twisting knife.

But where was the bullion? It had to be in Virginia City. And Farr must have known where. Or else Coe would not have had him murdered. Proof built a noose in the Washoe, Thorpe knew—not accusations. And only the uncovering of the stolen bullets could make Coe show his hand.

"You—" Thorpe began. He tensed suddenly, staring at the staircase landing. Only remnants of the strip of light remained on the plank boards. A squat, blocky man with a shiny, bald skull cut it into pieces with his leg shadows. He was glaring at the bartender. Hovering over his right shoulder, Thorpe saw the spidery man's bony face and beyond him the dark bulk of another tough. Coe, Garrick and Moore, Thorpe thought. Garrick's cold eyes were bright.

The three of them pounded down the stairs. They headed toward the bar on a line. Thorpe stood his ground. Five paces from him, the line broke. Garrick slanted off to the row of whiskey barrels and sat down. Moore moved beside Coe and Thorpe studied him briefly. He was a huge man and his large face had as many knife scars as an old head had wrinkles. He was armed. Surprised, Thorpe saw Coe was not.

"You discuss things with the wrong people, Mike," Coe told the barkeep regretfully. He had a cultured, Eastern accent and his tone was gentle, but Mike knew him and read what was on his face.

"All I said was—"

"I heard," the gentle, regretful voice said. "Take him, Moore—but not all of him."

Mike glanced desperately at the lunging Moore and swung for his double-barreled shotgun, slung on a rack behind him. He never

reached it. Moore wrenched him over the bar with a fast hand at his throat, and drove a meaty fist over his head.

Mike crumpled under the blow. A piece of his mustache floated onto the bar like a bloody feather. Moore held him off the floor like a kitten dangling from the jaws of a cat. Again and again, Moore's fist pounded its bloody target.

Thorpe smothered an impulse to interfere. *Coe doesn't fight, he murders. His enemies die in riots. There's a riot in the making here—by experts. One false move and—*

The thought stopped him.

"Enough, Moore," Coe said lightly, and laughed as Moore hoisted Mike over the bar and pitched the unconscious man through the batwings. Moore laughed, too. He bowed at the lady in a painting on a wall and blew her a kiss. Laughter flickered around the room.

"I dislike men who talk too much." Coe moved toward Thorpe, drawing a small Bible from his pocket. He wore expensive, river gambler's dress, black cutaway jacket, and a black string tie crossed on a patch of white shirt. His face was moon-round and his skull utterly hairless. Thorpe had heard Coe could quote any passage from the Bible from memory. He was never without it.

"Talkative men irritate me," Coe repeated.

"Go ahead, Coe," Thorpe whispered. He spotted Moore and Garrick sink their hands to their Bowies. "Call off your dogs. Your face is stickin' at me like a bullseye. My first slug's goin' your way!"

Coe smiled graciously. "What ever gave you the idea I'd trouble with you—" And he hurled his Bible at Thorpe's head with all his might.

The Bible split open in its flight and the pages whirled. Thorpe ducked, too late. He floundered badly, struck his head against the edge of the bar.

He tried to steady the spinning room. The crash of bowled-over tables jarred him out of it. He focused on the scene, piece by piece.

First, Garrick churning through the tables and chairs, pitching them to right and left, then Moore.

The huge tough burst out at him through the riot of shots and smoke. His Bowie was a twisting line of light at his shoulder.

Thorpe wasted no time drawing. He had seen knives in motion at this distance before. Moore would have him gut-ripped before he could slap leather.

THEY met jarringly and stood there, swaying. Thorpe's hand found and trapped Moore's knife wrist. Around them pounded the boots of miners, plunging out the windows and batwings. Someone swore and hurled a chair at the lone ceiling lantern. His aim was bad. The chair struck the chain glancingly and crashed down. Under the impact, the lantern swung to and fro, swaying the light from wall to wall.

In the fleeting illumination Thorpe saw Garrick whip and throw his knife through the smoke. He came all covered with sweat and wrestled more tigerishly. The big man broke under his pressure, bent at the waist and went whipping around.

He gave a little jump and screamed as Garrick's Bowie sank into his back.

Thorpe caught him at the throat with his left hand as he buckled. His Colt slid into his palm. He pumped two shots at the bar, where Coe was reaching for the shotgun at last, and Coe's hand vanished. There was a rasp of steel as the shotgun fell off the rack, its barrels smashed by bullets.

Thorpe leaped back, suddenly. Pain was cutting through his right leg at the thigh. He hung on to Moore's body for life and felt bullets throb into his shield. Across the room, Garrick's gun was flaming at him.

The long, spidery man was crouching under the painting, protected by a barricade of whiskey barrels. Around him, like a moat, whiskey flowed on the sawdusted floor from the punc-

(Continued on page 128)

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Fifteen Western Tales, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1945. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Fifteen Western Tales, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 757, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none; Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none; 4. That the two paragraphs, next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders, as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affirming full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 22nd day of October 1945. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 16, Register's No. 363 W-6. (My commission expires March 30, 1946.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

When the Big Dry hits, blood is cheaper than water—and Crag Farlow was all set to paint that range crimson with his own!



CHAPTER ONE

Blood and Water

BOB TUTTLE knew that trouble was coming when old Harry Hansen cleared his throat. Tuttle had been thinking about the cut fences on his Circle T spread, down near the water-hole he had developed. For the moment he had become careless, but now his right hand was near his holstered six-shooter as he glanced swiftly toward the old town bum who had sounded off the warning.

Harry Hansen was a bleary-eyed old-saddle-tramp who earned his meals by swamping out the Red Eagle Saloon. Hansen did not meet Tuttle's stabbing eyes, but his head bobbed in a careless gesture toward his right.

Tuttle shifted his gaze and tensed his shoulder muscles. A big man was facing him in a fighting crouch, hand on his six-shooter, and the pistol half out of leather. This was Crag Farlow of the C Bar F which joined Tuttle's Circle T on the east.

"Draw!" Farlow growled, and his low voice was like a humming buzz-saw. "Shoot when you clear leather!"

Bob Tuttle knew that he was already beaten to the gun, and there wasn't time to talk. If he made a try for his gun, Crag Farlow could prove self defense, and Farlow was the most stubborn cattleman in the Morego Valley.

"Shoot!" he said quietly. "You've got me faded on a sneak!"

He braced himself for the expected shock of

By **CHUCK MARTIN**

He had beaten Farlow to the draw when the girl knocked his arm aside. Then Farlow fired....



SHOOT WHEN YOU CLEAR LEATHER!

battering lead when Farlow thumbed back the hammer of his hand-gun. The trouble between these two was old, but the threat of burning powder was new. Bob Tuttle knew that this threat had been born of desperation, and he knew that he couldn't win. The best he could hope for was to take his killer with him, by way of the law. The law would call his killing a murder.

Crag Farlow clenched his teeth until his craggy jaw thrust out like a reef of granite. His gray eyes blazed savagely with killer light; the gun jumped from his holster as the muscles twitched in his powerful shoulder.

Bald-headed old Harry Hansen still earned a dollar or two shoeing horses when circumstances beyond his control permitted. He was well-liked by the saddle-pounding fraternity who spent their wages in the Red Eagle, and Harry liked the liquor they bought him. Then there was the rheumatiz which brought a misery to his creaking joints, come the rainy season.

Harry Hansen's horny fingers fiddled with a horse-shoer's crimp-block, a small square of hard steel which turned the nails outward in a shod hoof. His right hand went to the back of his neck to dislodge a blue-bottle fly, and

then that right hand flung out swift and true.

The small steel block flashed through the morning sun, but Bob Tuttle had seen the move. He threw himself down and to the side as the gun roared like a cannon before leaping from Crag Farlow's battered hand.

Farlow grunted and made a dive for the smoking gun under the tie-rail. His left hand was clawing for the weapon when Tuttle danced in and kicked the Colt toward the saloon porch where Harry Hansen still held down his tilted chair.

A SCREEN door slammed across the street. There was a shout and then the pound of running feet. Bob Tuttle braced himself against Farlow's rushing attack. He took two blows on his elbows, struck back with methodical accuracy—then the pounding feet reached them and a voice swore.

"Yo're under arrest, Crag Farlow. For disturbing the peace, discharging firearms within the city limits, and mebbe so for malicious destruction of property. Anything you say will be used again you, and we're on our way to jail!"

Most of the fight went out of Crag Farlow as he turned to face Jim Springer, the sheriff of Rainbow. A flush of color swept across Tuttle's bronzed face.

"Thanks, Jim," he said quietly. Then he turned to Farlow. "You want to talk some now? Now that you don't have me under the sights of your meat-gun?"

Crag Farlow's seamed face grew dark with anger, but he restrained himself. As though for the first time he realized that he had taken unfair advantage, and he hastened to make amends.

"Yeah, I'll talk," he said thickly. "This yellor-belly builds him a dam, and fences off the water like a short-horned sod-buster, and then he runs to the law when thirst-crazed critters stampedes down his blasted bobbed wire!"

"Look, you old mossy-head," Bob Tuttle said coldly. "You ain't as young as you used to be by at least twenty years, and you're just as ignorant as you was then. You can't raise stock by trial and error any more, but some of you old rannihans never learn."

"I want to talk some more now!" Farlow roared. "If I catch you so much as speaking to Pebble, it will be yore last talking!"

Bob Tuttle opened his lips to answer, but he stopped the retort when a pretty girl rode up to the rack on a stout Morgan bay horse.

"You called me, dad?" the girl asked Crag Farlow, and the cattleman whirled about with some of the anger fading from his rugged features.

"I was getting this sod-buster told," Far-

low told his daughter. "He come a-faunching into town this morning to complain about us busting down the bobbed-wire he strung around that water hole!"

Pebble Farlow frowned and then she saw her father's gun on the ground. She also saw him favoring his right hand, which was bleeding and swollen where Harry Hansen's steel block had bruised the flesh and bone behind the big knobby knuckles. She turned inquiring eyes to Bob Tuttle.

Farlow saw the look and said viciously, "That Circle T hombre rigged up a deal with that old wart-hog yonder to get me between a crossfire!"

"Yo're a liar, Crag!"

Old Harry Hansen snapped his tilted chair down on its four legs and came to his feet. He was tall, lathe-thin, and his long legs were warped to fit the barrel of a big horse. Wispy cowhorn mustaches drooped dejectedly from the corners of his almost toothless mouth, but there was nothing dejected about his growling voice.

"You was all set to jump Bob and gun him down without warning. You had yore cutter half outa leather and the hammer pronged back, and then you told him to make his fight. I'm sitting here in the sun taking care of the misery in my off-laig when you clear leather for to commit murder. Yeah, I bought chips in your tin-horn game. I throwed that crimping block of mine jest in time."

Pebble Farlow listened with her full red lips slightly parted in what might have been a smile. Born and raised on the Arizona cattle range, she had learned to read sign on her men, and now she could see the whole picture.

She turned to Bob Tuttle with a rueful note in her throaty voice. "I'm sorry, Bob, but I'm thankful you kept your temper."

"Pebble, you hit that hoss of yores down the hind legs and light a shuck for the ranch!" Farlow bellowed. "Me and mine don't want no truck with him and his'n. Don't you let me catch you so much as passing the time of day with that sod-buster!"

Pebble Farlow stared at her father, her face alive with a gathering storm. Then she saw the savage glaring light in his gray eyes and turned her horse and rode down the dusty street and out of town.

Crag Farlow was outnumbered, but he had fought against heavy opposition all his life. Things like long droughts and short grass, dust storms and flash floods, and the contrariness of his fellow men. Now he turned on old Harry Hansen and knotted up his left fist.

"I'm going to take you apart, you old wart-hog," he threatened viciously.

Hansen drawled, "I can take care of you and never get me up a sweat!"

"Stand hitched, Crag," the sheriff warned

sternly. "You're still under arrest, and you and me are going to jail."

C RAG FARLOW tried to jerk free from the sheriff's hold, but Springer tightened his grasp. As they crossed the street, old Harry Hansen spat behind his hand and started for the swinging doors of the saloon.

"Wait a minute, Harry," Tuttle called.

The old saddle-tramp turned slowly. "I don't want no part of you, either, Tuttle. Offering to sell water when a man's critters is dying of thirst!"

Tuttle asked quietly, "Does a man buy hay for his cattle when the range is poor?"

"You know blasted well he does," Hansen growled. "Because it costs money for to raise and cure good hay!"

"It cost me close to five thousand dollars to build that dam and make that *cienaga*," Tuttle answered quietly. "I learned that little thing from the Mormons over Saint John way. They store the water during the floods instead of letting it run off in the sand and dry up."

"That dam of yores is all the same like bobbed wire," Hansen growled. "Was a time when grass and water was both as free as the air."

"Yeah, and how many a drought have you rode out in your sinful life?" Tuttle asked sternly.

Old Harry scratched his bald head and puckered his lips thoughtfully. He spat unerringly at a blue-bottle fly, shifted the cud of twist in his lean jaw, and nodded slowly. He said nothing, but glanced for the first time with some understanding at the younger man. He waited for Tuttle to go on.

Tuttle said, "I bought that half section of land because of the year-round springs on the piece. Then I borrowed on the Circle T to build the dam and basins. That money is due in ninety days, and if I don't pay it, I'm out of business."

"I'm telling you this, Harry, because I've got a proposition to make. That's the real reason I came into town. But first I want you to see my side of this fight. The bank got in trouble this Spring—they had to raise money on their collateral, and Crag Farlow bought my paper from the bank. He won't give me an extension of time until shipping season, and if I don't pay what I owe, he takes over that half section with my water hole."

Hansen murmured, "Did you offer to sell him enough water to bring his critters through the drought?"

Bob Tuttle nodded. "Farlow is due to lose better than a thousand head," he answered soberly. "I offered to let them drink if Farlow would give me a little time on my paper, but he refused. So I made him a new offer. I'd

sell him enough water to bring his stock through until shipping season, or until it rains. For five dollars a head, and payment within thirty days."

A slow smile twitched the drooping long-horn mustaches. Harry Hansen asked softly, "What was your proposition, amigo?"

"I need a riding hand—one I can trust, and who won't scare easy. Also one who's willing to take a chance on my going under—"

"You've hired a man," the old saddle-tramp said happily. "Forty a month and found, and you furnish the shells. I just want to see that old sorry wart-hawg cut the bobbed wire around that water hole!"

CHAPTER TWO

Strictly Business

H ARRY HANSEN pulled his battered old Stetson low over his eyes, took a long look down at the flats along the river, and shifted the thirty-gun in his gnarled hands. He was also wearing a Colt .45 shooter and a belt filled with cartridges. His drooping mustaches moved jerkily as he watched two riders approaching.

Then he turned to stare at the big basins which were filled with stored water. Each basin was fenced in with a four-strand fence of barbed wire; another fence marked the boundaries of the Circle T. Up the slope on a little mesa, Bob Tuttle had built his private dam at the mouth of a small canyon. It was cool where Hansen crouched, because a slight wind was blowing down from the dam.

Hansen turned his back on the restless, gaunted C Bar F cattle which had worn a deep rut along the fence, shut his ears to their thirsty bawling. Lush grass was growing around the Circle T basins, and Bob Tuttle's Circle T cattle were in prime condition. Counting foundation stock and shippers, Tuttle's tally books wouldn't show more than six hundred head all told, but what he had was prime.

Old Harry's perspective had changed in the two days he had been drawing riding pay from Bob Tuttle. When the two riders were near enough to be identified, he levered a shell into the breech of his gun.

He thought, *It's old Crag and that purty filly of his'n. That Pebble gal is as pur' as a new red wagon.*

Crag Farlow rode up behind his gaunted cattle and forced a way through them to the fence. He became aware of old Harry when he heard the metallic click of the latter's gun hammer.

"I ain't painted for war, you mangy old coyote," he yelled. "Where's yore thieving boss? I rode over to wau-wau some with him."

"I'm repping for Bob, so make yore talk."

Farlow turned in the saddle and indicated his gaunted cattle with a sweep of his left arm. "Dying on their feet, them critters," he began bitterly. "All on account of one thieving neighbor hogging all the water."

"He ain't hogging yore water," Hansen contradicted. "Bob's water ain't out of no river or crick, and it's on his own boughten land!"

"Water is water," Farlow argued hotly.

"Yeah," Hansen agreed. "And it's like gold that away, Crag. It's where you find it."

"I'll give Tuttle a dollar a head to drink my stuff again' the rainy season," Farlow offered more pacifically.

"No dice," Hansen said with a shake of his head.

Crag Farlow stared, and his face grew black with an anger he could not restrain. Pebble Farlow smiled faintly as she nodded her dark head. There was a reminiscent expression in her brown eyes and around the half-smiling pout of her red lips.

"My critters are dying of thirst!" Farlow roared. "I'll make it two dollars a head to drink my stuff. Take it or leave it!"

"Let's leave it," Hansen said with a shrug.

His gnarled finger caressed the trigger guard of his rifle as Crag Farlow dismounted from his horse and ground-tied the animal with trailing reins. He shouldered his way up to the fence, took a pair of wire cutters from his hip pocket, ignoring the fact that old Harry Hansen had slipped the safety off his thirty-gun.

Hansen lifted the rifle to his shoulder and squinted down the long barrel. "Don't lay cutter to that bobbed-wire," he warned in a dry voice. "I'm drawing fighting pay to see that them fences stay as is!"

His daughter cried out and Farlow hesitated. "There's Bob!" The girl spurred her horse. "Bob—let me talk to you."

Bob Tuttle whirled his horse with a glad smile on his bronzed face. He came to the fence at a lope, tipped his gray Stetson, and waited for the girl to speak.

"Our cattle need water, Bob," the girl pleaded. "What are your terms?"

"Five dollars a head until next shipping season."

"I'll see you in hell in yore bare feet!" Crag Farlow bellowed. "That's a hold-up, and you know it!"

He caught the top strand between his pliers. Harry Hansen's rifle cracked sharply and the wire-cutters jumped from Farlow's numbed hand.

Farlow made a stab at the holstered gun on his right hip and Hansen warned, "Leave that smoke-pole pouched, you old warthog. You fill yore hand, and I'll drill you center!"

Bob Tuttle watched the two old-timers in

grim silence. He avoided looking at Pebble, but the girl put out a small hand and gripped his right arm.

For the first time since he had known her he detected fright in her voice. "There's got to be some way—dad is so stubborn he would die before he'd give in."

"And so will his cattle," Tuttle answered quietly. "Unless he agrees to my terms!"

"Does money mean so much to you, Bob?" the girl asked bitterly.

Tuttle nodded. "Ask your father. It means just about everything to me just now," he answered heavily.

"There was a time when you and I were friends, Bob Tuttle," Pebble reminded softly. "Won't you compromise—for me?"

She read her answer in his silence and turned her horse and rode back to her father. Crag Farlow had mounted.

Harry Hansen called to him, "That's twice I've had to keep you from killing a man, Crag. The next time you make a try, I don't aim to just knock something out of your fumbling old hand!"

Farlow swore hoarsely and whirled his horse and hit the animal with the spurs. "C'mon, Pebble. The next time we come down this way, it will be strictly business!"

PEBBLE FARLOW watched her father with a worried gleam in her brown eyes. He was silently oiling his rifle and six-shooter. It was in his silence that she read the most menace.

Finally she spoke. "You mustn't, dad."

Crag Farlow looked up. He said harshly, "I was raising beef before that Tuttle sod-buster was foaled!"

"Bob isn't a sod-buster, dad—"

"He's breaking ground and raising hay," Farlow snarled. "If that ain't busting the sod, I'll throw in with you."

"But you had to buy hay last winter and the year before," the girl reminded him. Now that she had broken into his silence, she felt surer of herself. "Bob raised his own hay, and when he ships his beef this fall, he will make some money for the first time since the Big Dry."

"If he ships his beef this fall," Farlow said with a shrug. "I'll teach that sod-buster to buck Crag Farlow!"

She said gently, "There's more to this than you like to admit. Bob has something on his side."

"Name it."

"He owns that half section where he built the dam and reservoir."

Crag Farlow holstered his pistol and turned to face his daughter with his head drawn down between his hunched shoulders.

"Mebbe you're on his side, too," he suggested grimly.

"I'm not taking sides," Pebble answered wearily. "Are you going down there and cut his fences again?"

"There's more than one way to skin a skunk," Farlow answered harshly. "When a thousand head of thirsty cattle get to stampeding, all hell couldn't keep them from cool clear water!"

Pebble sat back and closed her eyes. This was it, then. She could almost see the picture her father's words conjured up for her. A thousand crazed cattle crashing against the wire fences, plunging on through, and perhaps wrecking the basins which held the precious water. Many of the animals would be foundered, and after they had slaked their thirsts, the precious water would run away to dry out in the sandy soil.

And Bob Tuttle would fight. Bob wasn't quarrelsome, and he didn't pretend to be fast with a six-shooter, but she had seen him shoot and knew that he could hit what he was shooting at.

She became aware of her father standing before her.

"You go to your room, young woman!" Farlow ordered sternly. "You're—"

He stopped as a tall cowboy stomped up on the porch with a rifle in his hands.

"Me and the boys is ready to ride, Crag," the puncher announced, and then he saw Pebble. "We'll round up the saddlestock and haze 'em in here to the home ranch," he added lamely.

"Look, Tucson," Pebble spoke up. "You boys brought the saddle-stock in last week. And you don't need rifles to round up a cavvy of horses," she added meaningly.

"We missed a few strays, and the coyotes are bad out there in the river bottom since the cow critters gaunted up," Tucson muttered. "Ain't that right, boss?" he appealed to Farlow.

Farlow grunted, "Let's quit the ranch and get about the business. I'll be back shortly, Pebble."

Pebble Farlow sighed and turned away. She waited until the echoing hoofbeats had died in the distance, then went out to the barn. Perhaps she could prevent bloodshed if she hurried. She might even talk Bob into cutting his fences, now that the showdown was here and the fence would be destroyed, anyway.

Her Morgan took her from the ranch at a dead run. By cutting around to the north, she could ride right up to the Circle T house through the big gates. The dam was at the lower end of the Circle T, and if she were lucky, she might find Bob before her father did.

The sun was setting when Pebble rode into

the neat yard an hour later. She tied her sweating horse to the tie-rail in front of the white adobe ranch house, and Ma Tuttle came out on the porch with outstretched hands.

"Where's Bob?"

"He and that Harry Hansen rode down to the basins," Ma Tuttle answered lightly. "Come and sit in the swing where it is cool."

"I've got to see Bob. There's going to be trouble. I want to stop it if I can!"

"Trouble?" Ma asked with a little frown.

"I didn't know there was—"

The girl pulled the slip-knot that held her horse, vaulted into the saddle and raced down through the south pasture. She stared wide-eyed when she saw some new holding corrals where shipping steers were feeding from long rows of mangers. Big concrete basins had been built in the center of the feeding pens, and the saddle-stock were well-fleshed and sleek with good living.

Pebble thought of the range cattle on the C Bar F, gaunted and thin from poor grass and a shortage of water. Her father had even refused to install windmills, claiming that new-fangled methods were for Pilgrims and sod-busters.

The sharp bark of a rifle broke into her frantic haste.

She spurred her horse and raced away in the direction of the sound. Two more shots rang out in the gathering twilight, so close together that Pebble knew two rifles had spoken. Then she was on the mesa where the earthen dam caught and held back the water in the canyon, and Pebble drew up her horse and stared down the grassy slopes.

An icy hand seemed to clutch at her heart as she saw the picture spread out below her. Three panels of the boundary fence had been cut, and the barbed strands had been laid carefully back to avoid cutting the cattle which would surely come through the opening.

But that wasn't all. Three more panels of wire had been cut around the lower basin which was now brimming over with cool clear water. Then her spirits rose—no one but Bob Tuttle or Harry Hansen could have cut those wires. . . .

Suddenly her eyes widened. The C Bar F cattle had been driven away from the water they could smell—now they were being driven back by four riders, perhaps a half mile away, riders waving crackling slickers behind the thirsty and terrified herd.

Down by the first brimming basin, Pebble could see Bob Tuttle to the left of the Gap he had cut in his fence. Harry Hansen was over to the right, and both were firing their rifles in a vain attempt to turn the stampeding herd. A C Bar F steer fell every time a rifle barked, but the terrified cattle kept coming like an on-rushing avalanche of destruction.



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Pebble's heart lost its happiness, and she gipped her horse with a blunted spur.

Bob Tuttle saw her coming, and he jumped to his feet. He waved his arm for the girl to turn aside, but Pebble Farlow waved back and kept her horse headed for the gap in the boundary fence.

Tuttle dropped his rifle and jumped his horse which was grazing close by with trailing whangs. He was in the saddle with a shout for Hansen to follow his lead, and the bald old saddle-tramp climbed his scarred hull and went whooping through the gap as Tuttle and Pebble raced through.

CHAPTER THREE

Crimson Range

BOB TUTTLE was grim-faced as he shouldered his horse into Pebble's mount and turned both animals along the four-strand fence. Harry Hansen had reined off to the right, and Pebble turned her head when she heard a snarling rending crash.

She gasped, "Your fences, Bob!"

Bob Tuttle reined in his horse. The stampeding cattle had broken through a whole section of fence. Beeves were down in the grass, with the weight of the stampede forcing other steers over their fallen fellows. A wide section of the boundary fence was down, and Pebble moaned softly when the rushing cattle came to the second fence which surrounded the lower basin.

Again came the grinding roar as tons of flesh and bone crashed through the barbed barrier. Many of the terrified steers were forced up the sloping banks of the basin and out into the deep water. As the stampede continued to flow unchecked, the lower wall of the basin was trampled to soggy mud under churning hoofs.

Bob Tuttle watched with a smouldering anger in his wide blue eyes. Of all the cattlemen in Morego Valley, he had been the only one to store up waste water. He watched silently as the split hoofs tore down the retaining wall of the lower basin.

He hit his horse with the hooks and rode to meet Crag Farlow who was loping up with his three C Bar F hands following their boss.

"Lay yore hackles, sod-buster!" Farlow shouted. "My offer still stands, and I'll pay two dollars a head to drink my critters!"

"You're a low-down rustling thief!" Tuttle accused bitterly. "That water belonged to me, and you stole it!"

"Don't you go to calling me out of my name!" Farlow roared. "I'll gun you outen that saddle and make you eat them words!"

Shoot When You Clear Leather!

Tucson Bailey slapped for his belt-gun behind Crag Farlow. A rifle barked from over to the right, near the ruined boundary fence. Tucson flipped sideways from his saddle, rolled like a cat, and sat up holding his right forearm. Then the raucous voice of old Harry Hansen husked through the deepening twilight.

"You other C Bar F rannies stay out of this ruckus. It's between them two!"

The two C Bar F punchers raised their hands shoulder-high. Crag Farlow did not even turn his head. His hand was inching down to his holstered six-shooter, and he gave the go-ahead just as Pebble rode up beside Bob Tuttle.

Tuttle's Colt cleared leather with the hammer pronged back under his thumb. He had beaten his stubborn old neighbor to the draw, when something went wrong. Pebble screamed softly and shouldered her horse into Tuttle's bay. Her hand slapped down Tuttle's gun at the same time, just as a deafening roar cannoned out to shatter the twilight stillness.

She heard Bob Tuttle grunt, and then he was sliding down the side of his horse. He braced himself, holstered his unfired gun, swayed a time or two, and pitched forward to measure his length.

A rifle barked nastily just as Tuttle struck the ground face down. Then came a startled yell, and Pebble saw her father fling out his right hand with the smoking pistol spilling from his bleeding fingers. She also saw Harry Hansen behind his thirty-gun, with a wisp of smoke trailing up from the rifle barrel.

"Git, you mangy rustlers!"

Crag Farlow whirled his horse and raked the big gray with both rowels. His cowboys followed him at a dead run, and then the paralysis left the muscles of the frightened girl.

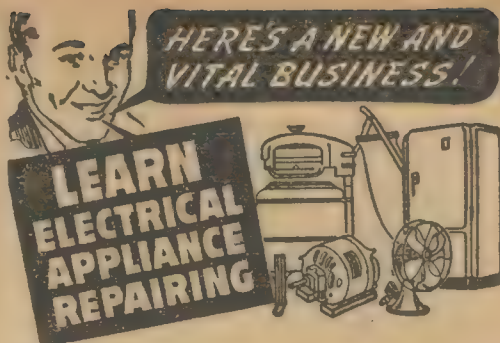
She dismounted hurriedly and ran to the side of the fallen Tuttle, as Harry Hansen rode up with a six-shooter in his gnarled right hand. "I should have killed that stubborn old man of yores, and I'll do it yet if Bob cashes in his chips!"

"He—he mustn't die," Pebble moaned, but the old saddle-tramp had other business.

"You!" he yelled at the wounded C Bar F puncher he had shot through the shoulder. "Climb that bronc of yores and git. Tell your boss there will be a murder charge again' him, among other things!"

Tucson Bailey nodded, climbed his saddle awkwardly and rode away without speaking. Then old Harry Hansen turned to Pebble Farlow.

"I saw him," Pebble whispered. "Bob could have killed dad—I—I didn't want him to. I—love him, Harry!"



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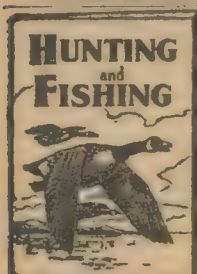
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

"Love!" the old saddle-tramp snorted. "Never had no truck with it, and I don't want none. Look at what it got Bob, and him one of the squarest hombres in Arizona. A gun-crease in his haid, but he like to've died. An' lose everything he's worked for."

"I don't understand," Pebble murmured.

"Looky down there at those busted fences, and that lower basin," Hansen said gruffly. "All the water gone out of that busted tank, and half your old man's critters is foundered. It cost Bob all he could borrow on the Circle T to build the dam and them basins, and now he can't repay the loan. That's what your old man did to Bob Tuttle!"

"He—he said he'd pay Bob two dollars a head to drink our cattle!"

"Look, little Missy," the old saddle-tramp said harshly. "Bob owed the bank five thousand dollars. The bank needed money. Your dad bought up Bob's paper, and he won't extend the note until after shipping season. Bob told your dad that it would cost him five dollars a round to drink those C Bar F critters, and then he could pay off that note and save the Circle T. Now who do you think wants this half section with the year-round springs on it?"

Pebble closed her eyes and lowered her head. Harry Hansen had been patching the ugly bullet-burn in Bob Tuttle's temple. Abruptly, for the first time, the unconscious man stirred.

"It's raining," Tuttle muttered drowsily. "The Big Dry is over!"

PEBBLE FARLOW sat beside the bed. The Doctor from Rainbow had returned to town after telling Ma Tuttle that her son would be up and around within a week. He had suffered mostly from the shock of the heavy forty-five slug. There was a knock on the door, and he reached out a hand for the girl's.

"Come right in, Reverend," he called. "Did Harry Hansen get the license?"

"I'll tell a man," Baldy Hansen answered as he followed the minister into the big living room. "Oh, Ma," he shouted. "You can come in now and stand up with me as a witness while the Gospel shark ties a good tight knot!"

Ma Tuttle came in from the kitchen with a smile of happiness wreathing her face.

"He took advantage of you, Pebble," Ma whispered to the girl. "He's as strong as a work-horse, and he dressed himself while you were feeding the horses."

Bob Tuttle grinned and threw back the covers. He was fully dressed except for his cowboy boots and spurs, which Harry Hansen pulled on the feet of his grinning young boss.

"You will join hands," Reverend Gates di-

Shoot When You Clear Leather!

rected, as he opened his Book. "Do you, Robert Tuttle . . ."

As the minister rode out of the yard, a furious clatter of hoofs roared through the gate. Harry Hansen looked through the open door, took a gunbelt from the back of a chair, and strapped it around the lean hips of Bob Tuttle.

"Bad news always rides a fast hoss, boss," he told Tuttle. "Yonder comes old man Crag Farlow, and he's still packing his shooting iron."

"Bob!" Pebble gasped.

Tuttle told her quietly, "You wait in the kitchen with Ma, while I do some unfinished business with the boss of C Bar F!"

"You promised to obey," Baldy Hansen reminded the hesitant girl. "You heard what the boss said."

Pebble turned to stare at the old saddle-tramp, and Harry Hansen winked broadly as he smiled. She nodded then and followed Ma Tuttle into the roomy kitchen, and a moment later Crag Farlow stepped up on the porch and knocked on the door.

"Come in, and wipe your feet," Hansen shouted.

Crag Farlow scuffed his boots on the mat and stepped into the room. His right arm was in a sling, and the hand was heavily bandaged.

"I came over to talk about that water my critters drank," Farlow began lamely. "I'm willing to pay a fair price, now that we have both cooled down some!"

"I haven't cooled down some," Tuttle answered stubbornly. "And I haven't had time to figure up all the damage you caused!"

"I always go halfway to meet a worthy opponent," Farlow answered stiffly. "You wanted five dollars a head; I'll settle for two-fifty!"

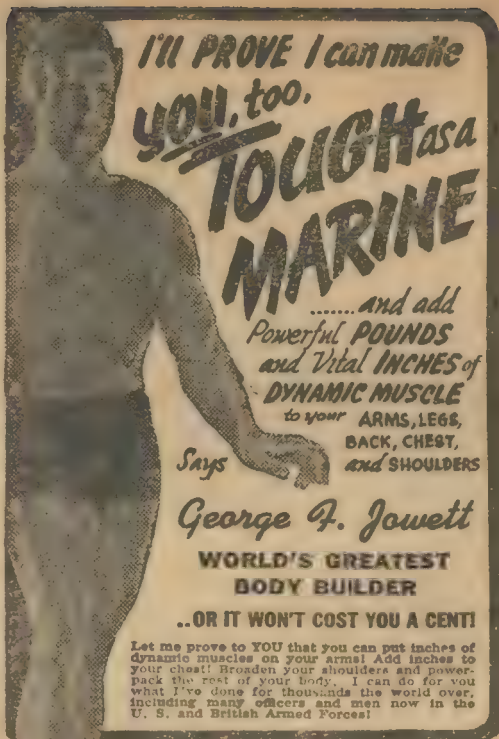
"You will pay six-fifty a round," Bob Tuttle said firmly. "I figure that extra dollar and a half a head will pay to rebuild the damage you caused when you stampeded your stock right through my fences. Say about fifteen hundred dollars to rebuild that lower tank, and the five dollars a head to drink your critters still stands!"

"I won't pay it!" Farlow rapped out harshly. "I'll take you to court and keep you there for the next ten years!"

"I'm not forgetting that you shot me on a sneak," Bob Tuttle reminded the cattleman. "I see you are still painted for war."

"Mebbe you want to sign a complaint?" Farlow asked. "In case you do, let me remind you that you were trespassing on C Bar F range when I triggered my slug!"

"Why you pizened old horny toad!" Hansen burst out, "Bob has you whip-sawed from here to who pried the chunk. All yore cattle-



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critters were about to die for the want of water. Then he goes soft and we cut the boundary fence and the one around the lower basin because he can't stand the sight of them cattle suffering no longer an'—"

"You—three dollars a round, take it or leave it," Farlow said stubbornly. "That's my last offer."

"Six-fifty, and you can take it or leave it," Tuttle answered just as bluntly.

"I'll law you in court for the next ten years," Farlow threatened savagely as he turned toward the door.

"Nuh-uh, you won't," Tuttle contradicted. "The Big Dry ain't over yet, and those critters of yours completely ruined that lower tank. Enough water for a day or two, but after that, I'm driving them out and mending my fences. Right now those C Bar F cattle are trespassing on Circle T land!"

"It won't be Circle T land much longer!" Farlow shouted. "I hold that paper of yours, and I won't give you an extension of time!"

"You mean you'd take the Circle T?" Tuttle asked in a hushed voice.

"I'm a business man," Farlow boasted. "And I mean to have that half-section with those year-round springs!"

"And you might get it," Tuttle admitted. "But you will lose a thousand head of cattle first, and them worth thirty-five dollars a round!"

Crag Farlow started to smile and changed his mind. He stared at Bob Tuttle, saw something he didn't like in the cowboy's face, and came a step farther into the room.

"Meaning which?" he demanded bluntly.

"Meaning that when your C Bar F critters drink the muddy water left in that first basin they broke down, you better drive them to some other place where the water is free," Tuttle said coldly. "I mean to guard that water hole of mine against all comers, and there ain't any signs of the Big Dry breaking!"

"And Bob's wife ain't ailing any," Baldy Hansen added. "She'll pitch right in an' help."

"You say this sod-buster found a gal fool enough to marry him?" Farlow sneered.

Bob Tuttle flushed with anger and took a step forward. He stopped when a small hand clasped his arm, and then Pebble was facing her astonished father.

"Pebble!" Farlow gasped. "You've always loved this Circle T spread, and I was going to get it for you—" He stopped and lowered his head. Most of the fight went out of his rugged face, and the arrogance disappeared when his wide shoulders began to sag. He walked to the door and stood looking down into the valley

Shoot When You Clear Leather!

where the green grass margined the dam and the upper basin.

Bob Tuttle put his good arm around Pebble and drew her close.

"Quit fighting your head, Farlow," he said. "You're in the business of raising beef, and you can't raise 'em without water. Don't you think it's about time you was learning something about your trade?"

Crag Farlow listened with his mouth open. Then his face clouded with rage as he took a step forward. Again he caught himself and grinned sheepishly.

"Might be you are right," he admitted grudgingly. "I can't afford to lose thirty thousand, and I can't stand to see them C Bar F critters suffer. I'll pay what you ask, but don't get the idea you can teach me anything about raising beef!"

"Have it your way, you stubborn old mossy-head," Bob said quietly. "I was just going to show you how to double your profits."

"Tell him, Bob," Pebble pleaded. "His bark is worse than his bite."

"I dunno," Bob muttered, as he caressed his bandage. "He bit me, didn't he?"

"And I'm saying I'm sorry, son," Farlow surprised the group. "I was matching my draw again Bob's drop, but the gun went off when Pebble threwed off yore aim. I'm sorry as all get out."

"Well, cut my cinches," Baldy Hansen whispered. "I cert'n'y am!"

"I'll say you are," Farlow barked at the old saddle-tramp.

"If you're calling me what I was thinking about myself, you better take it baek," Hansen warned.

Crag Farlow squared his shoulders, smiled broadly, and marched across the room. He held out his hand to Bob Tuttle. He said, "Maybe you can teach me a thing or two—an' maybe you can't. You're sure up ahead of me now. I'll let you take over worryin' about my profits—just as soon's I catch up."

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 115)

tured kegs, riddled by slugs. The room was empty of miners. Above, the lantern swayed rhythmically, casting a path of light through the smoke from wall to wall.

Thorpe waited for the light to cut across the barricade. Garrick's bony face was suddenly, fleetingly revealed. Thorpe shot.

The spidery man galvanized out of the smoky darkness. The shot had taken him through the teeth. The lower half of his face was a smear of crimson. He flung one long arm upward, his clawing fingers catching the painting's frame. He hung onto it as though the painted lady could keep him alive. The painting broke loose from the wall and fell with him.

Thorpe flung Moore's body away, wishing he would never see it again. Yet his glance moved back. Gleaming on the floor was a crucifix, cut from a rosary. It had fallen from Moore's shirt pocket.

The incongruity of the crucifix and this dead killer made him sick to his soul—and he was struck once more by the smallness of the things he'd valued and lived by—the drifting, the fighting, the fists and the knives and the guns. Yet there was one more chore to be done.

"Coe." He was amazed how softly he could say that name.

Heavy silence answered him.

Thorpe moved to the barricade, flung Garrick off and ducked behind the kegs.

Then he shouted, "Coe! This is a funny kind of rotgut you got in two of these barrels! Whiskey that don't run out when a slug busts clean through 'em!"

"I'm unarmed." Coe's hands stuck up high over the bar like the top of a Y. His shiny, bald head followed them up.

"Get Moore's gun." Thorpe walked out of the barricade. He holstered his Colt. "Lift it by the trigger."

"Let's be sensible," Coe said. "Only you and I know about it now. There's enough silver bullets in those whiskey barrels—"

Thorpe swore. Before his mind's eye rose a cairn of rocks, turning snow white in the wind. He nodded at the Colt butt, jutting out of Moore's gunbelt. He said with a certain stubbornness, "You're goin' to die. You might as well die fighting."

Coe shrugged. "I'm a religious man," he said in his gentle way. He moved to where his Bible lay on the floor. "If you have no objection I'd like to have this with me now." He stooped to pick it up.

"Don't throw it again," Thorpe warned. "Try it and you'll have daylight in you before you get it outta your hand."

DRIFTERS DIE YOUNG

"Don't be absurd." Coe recovered his Bible and brushed sawdust off the cover reverently. He walked to Moore's body. The Colt butt gleamed.

Thorpe was ready from head to toe. "By the trigger," he said.

To his left, the picture frame snapped suddenly under Garrick's body, the cracking wood reverberating like a pistol shot. Coe frowned, annoyed. He carefully blew a last fragment of dust from his Bible and slid it into his jacket.

"That's no good," Thorpe breathed and he drew. He slanted two shots at Coe's head. Coe staggered. His hide-out derringer, drawn from a shoulder holster, tumbled out of his hand. He was dead on his feet.

A swirl of sawdust lifted from the floor as he struck. Beside his shiny skull fluttered the pages of his Bible, where he'd let it drop.

MINUTES later, Thorpe was explaining to the sheriff and hastily summoned Wells Fargo officials. The two whiskey barrels were opened, revealing gleaming heaps of silver bullets. Standing beside Thorpe was a medico, treating his wounded leg. Thorpe impatiently listened to their praise and the talk of reward from the Wells Fargo men.

He said, "Don't want no reward. Didn't fight for no damned reward. Hurry it up, doc."

"Colder outside than hell on a stoker's holiday," the medico snapped. "Where you hurryin' to?"

"Home."

His wound treated, Thorpe moved to the batwings. He booted one wing out and peered skyward. The cloud mass had broken, and a huge moon hung, shining brightly, over the snow-waves. An aura was around it like a lantern in a window.

Home. The word was warm and shiny in his mind.

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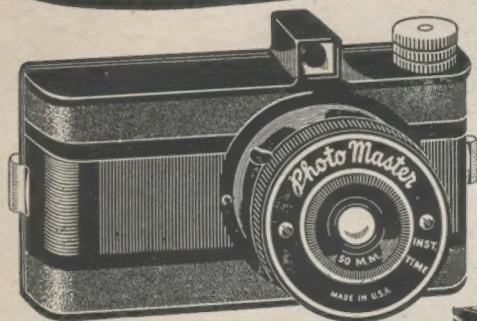
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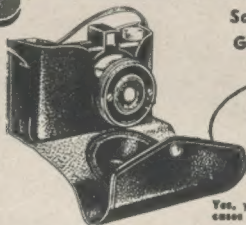
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